# Coping with Interpersonal Conflict at Work in Small Business: The Moderating Role of Supervisor and Co-Worker Support

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# Afrontamiento del Conflicto Interpersonal en el Trabajo en Pequeñas Empresas: El Papel Moderador del Apoyo del Supervisor y del Compañero

Inés Martínez-Corts
Universidad de Sevilla

Marina Boz
Universidad de Sevilla

Francisco J. Medina
Universidad de Sevilla

Miriam Benítez
Universidad de Huelva

Lourdes Munduate
Universidad de Sevilla

**Abstract.** The aim of this study was to analyze the relationship between two types of interpersonal conflict at work (relationship and task conflict) and job satisfaction in the context of small business, focusing on the buffering role that different sources of social support (supervisors and co-workers) may play in this relationship. Adopting such a contingent perspective our main findings show that, first, supervisor support buffers the link between relationship conflict and job satisfaction while co-worker support moderates the link between task conflict and job satisfaction, and second, that the model estimating the influence of supervisor support and relationship conflict is relatively more important for predicting employees' job satisfaction than the model that relates co-worker support and task conflict. Our study makes a few contributions to research on small businesses and interpersonal conflict at work, two streams that traditionally have been developed separately, and finally highlight important practical implications for the field of Human Resource Management.
*Keywords:* relationship conflict, task conflict, supervisor support, co-worker support, small business.

**Resumen.** La finalidad de este estudio fue analizar las relaciones existentes entre los tipos de conflicto y la satisfacción el trabajo en PYMES, analizando el papel moderador que diferentes fuentes de apoyo (compañeros y superior) pueden jugar en esta relación. Adoptando una perspectiva contingente en la gestión del conflicto organizacional, los principales hallazgos muestran que el apoyo del superior amortigua la relación entre el conflicto relacional y la satisfacción en el trabajo, mientras que el apoyo de los compañeros amortigua la relación entre el conflicto de tareas y la satisfacción en el trabajo. Además, el modelo que analiza la influencia del apoyo del supervisor y del conflicto relacional es más importante para predecir la satisfacción que el modelo que analiza la influencia del conflicto de tareas y del apoyo de los compañeros. Este estudio realiza una contribución al estudio del conflicto en organizaciones pequeñas, dos campos de trabajo que han sido estudiados de forma separada; del mismo modo, los hallazgos permiten la realización de implicaciones prácticas para el campo de la Gestión de los Recursos Humanos.
*Palabras clave:* conflicto relacional, conflicto de tareas, apoyo del supervisor, apoyo de los compañeros, PYMES.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), i.e. organizations with less than 250 employees, play a central role in the well-being of local and regional communities in Europe, for it represents 99.8% of all enterprises and contributes for 87.8% of the total labor productivity in the EU-27 zone (Eurostat, 2008). In fact, small-sized enterprises (SSEs) account for 98.7% of such organizations, i.e. enterprises with less than 50 employees. The Spanish industry is no different being characterized by the same fragmentary nature, for

about 98.5% of its industries are SSEs (Ministerio de Turismo, Industria y Comercio, 2010). Specifically in Andalusia, 98.8% of all SMEs are in fact small-sized enterprises (SSEs) with less than 50 employees (Ministerio de Turismo, Industria y Comercio, 2010).

Nevertheless, although national and international industry are mainly composed by small businesses, most Human Resource Management research has been conducted in large organizations or public institutions with great numbers of employees (Hayney & Dundon, 2006). In this sense, national and international research on interpersonal conflict at work and its consequences has been no exception, as mostly previous evidence has been based on studies developed in large organizations (Jehn, 1995) so that the validity of such results for other types of organizations has yet to be demon-

strated. As a starting point, previous studies have shown that the consequences of interpersonal conflict may vary depending on the type of organization analyzed (Guerra, Martínez-Corts, Munduate, & Medina, 2005). For example, it has been found that task conflict has negative effects on employees' job satisfaction and affective well-being in private organizations, but not in public organizations. So far, no known study has specifically examined interpersonal conflicts and its consequences in the context of small businesses, despite the fact that in such organizations conflicts may play a more salient role and the associated coping mechanisms may also be different (Dodd, 2011; Villanueva & Djurkovic, 2009). In attempt to fill this gap, in this study we aim to analyze the relationship between interpersonal conflict at work and job satisfaction in small businesses, focusing on the potential buffering role of perceived supervisor support (PSS) and perceived co-worker support (PCS) in this particular context.

### Interpersonal conflict in SSEs

Conflict is an inherent process to human relations, especially in work settings. People have different experiences, values, opinions and ways to carry out tasks, which are likely to lead to disagreements. Surprisingly, interpersonal conflicts at work have not been studied yet in the context of small business, which is a particularly relevant context for studying this phenomenon for several reasons. First, small businesses are characterized as non-bureaucratic organizations usually managed personally by their owners (Dodd, 2011). Consequently in small businesses, family-related and nonfamily employees coexist very closely (Barnett & Kellermanns, 2006), increasing the potential for divergences concerning attitudes and values to arise and risking the organizational survival (Chua, Chrisman, & Sharma, 2003). As several studies have shown, perceived diversity with regard to attitudes and values is strongly related to interpersonal conflict at work (Hobman, Bordia, & Gallois, 2003; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). Second, because in small businesses processes are less formalized and working conditions are not so structured, employees are frequently required to carry out a great variety of tasks that can lead to higher role ambiguity (Bernhard & O'Driscoll, 2011; Dodge, Fullerton, & Robbins, 1994), which in turn has been found to be strongly related to interpersonal conflict at work (Tidd, McIntyre, & Friedman, 2004). All in all, interpersonal conflicts are very likely to arise in the context of small business due to proximity in relationships between family owners and nonfamily members, less structured processes and potential for high role ambiguity.

Previous research suggests the existence of two main types of interpersonal conflict at work: Relationship conflict and task conflict (Jehn, 1994; 1995). Relationship conflict consists of perceived interpersonal incompatibilities among group members such as disagreements about values, attitudes, political aspects or family norms (Jehn, 1997). On the other hand, task conflict consists of job-related disagreements about how to carry out specific tasks such as differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions, for example, discrepancies about procedures or the distribution of resources (De Dreu, van Dierendonck, & Dijkstra, 2004). While prior evidence suggests that relationship conflict is always dysfunctional for employees, the consequences of task conflict have proven to be contradictory (Benítez, Guerra, Medina, Martínez-Corts, & Munduate, 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). For example, Alper, Tjosvold, and Law (1998) showed that task conflict was related to greater team confidence and performance while others demonstrated that task conflict (and also relationship conflict) was mainly negatively associated with both group performance and satisfaction outcomes (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In line with De Dreu and Weingart's review (2003), recent studies have also found both types of interpersonal conflict to be linked to decreased job satisfaction and low psychological wellbeing (Boz, Martínez, & Munduate, 2009; Guerra et al., 2005). Some authors argue that the main explanation for such different results lies on the situational factors embedded in the contexts where the two conflict types arise and develop (Putnam, 1994; Rollison, 2002). Such contingent perspective has been put forward by recent authors for seeking to explain how employees can benefit from the positive effects that task conflict may offer, and how they can reduce the negative consequences associated with relationship conflict (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Tjosvold, 2008). In this study, we adopt this contingent perspective to analyze the negative link between relationship and task conflict and job satisfaction, focusing on the potential buffering role of perceived supervisor support (PSS) and perceived co-worker support (PCS) as relevant situational factors in the context of small business.

### Perceived supervisor and co-worker support in small business

Social support stemming from supervisors and co-workers are key resources for reducing negative effects associated with personal discrepancies as well as fostering satisfaction at work (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). Supervisors and co-workers can advise and help employees to better carry out their jobs (Karasek, Triandis, & Chaudhry, 1982), improve their interpersonal relationships and ultimately contribute to improve their well-being at work (Sims, Silgyi, & Keller, 1976). Likewise, Cohen and Wills (1985)

showed that supportive relations at work can benefit employees in three ways; first, by keeping employees task-oriented and focused on the resolution of problems as opposed to being preoccupied with negative feelings and anxiety; second, by encouraging employees to take action aimed at effectively reducing conflict; and third, by assuring employees of backing for their actions.

In small businesses, the importance of supervisor and co-worker support can become even more salient due to the proximity in relationships and centralized control of the organizational dynamics. According to Mintzberg (1980), small businesses are characterized by simple structures, minimally elaborated in terms of differentiation among its units and highly centralized. In such contexts, leaders are usually one individual that retains control over decision-making and coordinates others' work, all at all using informal communication. Furthermore, due to restricted possibilities for upward mobility and financial benefits, employees in such contexts are more motivated for intrinsic and social rewards like supervisor and coworker support (Hodson & Sullivan, 1985; Wallace & Kay, 2009). In fact, recent research has posited that small businesses promote more supportive working relationships than large organizations (Wallace & Kay, 2009).

Several studies have demonstrated the buffering role that social support may exert to reduce the negative consequences of interpersonal conflict at work on a diverse range of outcomes such as stress, strain, job satisfaction and job performance (Ducharme & Martin, 2000; Fisher, 1985; Haines, Hurlbert, & Zimmer, 1991; Park, Wilson, & Lee, 2004). Importantly, both supervisors and co-workers may provide social support at work and these two sources of support are likely to influence employees' attitudes differently. For instance, PSS has been found to be more strongly related to job satisfaction, affective commitment and turnover intentions than PCS (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). On the other hand, communication with peers has been found to be more important than communication with supervisors to buffer the trauma-strain relationship (Stephens & Long, 2000).

Nevertheless, despite this previous evidence, only a few studies have examined both sources of social support simultaneously (Ng & Sorensen, 2008) and as Illies, Johnson, Judge and Keeny (2010) point out, so far no known study have explored the influence of social support on the relationship between interpersonal conflict and affective outcomes distinguishing between conflict types (task and relationship conflict) and source of social support (supervisor and co-worker). Therefore, taking into account the importance of interpersonal relationships and social support for both the functioning and the well-being of employees in the context of small business, as well as previous research on interpersonal conflict at work, in this study our purpose is twofold. First, we aim to confirm that social support can attenuate the negative effects of interper-

sonal conflict to employees' job satisfaction in the context of small business. Second, from a contingent perspective, we aim to demonstrate that the perceived source of social support (i.e. supervisors or co-workers) will play a differential buffering role on the link between interpersonal conflict and job satisfaction contingent upon the type of conflict experienced (i.e. relationship or task conflict).

### The moderating role of PSS

Previous evidence suggests that the content of employees' interactions with their supervisors differ substantially from their interaction with co-workers due to differences in hierarchy, power bases, trust, physical proximity, amongst others (Ducharme & Martin, 2000). In this sense, a recent study highlighted the need for distinguishing between the sources of social support (i.e. supervisors and co-workers) in order to adequately analyze its influence on employees' well-being (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

PSS is defined in terms of the extent to which employees perceive their supervisor to be supportive of improving the quality of interpersonal relationships among group members (Levy, 1983). Evidence suggests that when levels of PSS are high, a supportive mentality is created leading to decreased interpersonal discrepancies and increased positive relationships among group members (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, & Levin, 2003). Likewise, Thomas, Bliese and Jex (2005) found that midlevel management support attenuated the relationship between interpersonal conflict and continuance commitment. Moreover, it has been shown that supervisor intervention is one of the most frequently used coping strategies in intra-organizational bulling, which consists of an escalated type of relationship conflict (Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005).

The positive influence of PSS might be particularly relevant in the context of small business because of the structure of such organizations, where employees are socially motivated, interpersonal relationships are key and control is highly centralized, carried out by means of informal mechanisms (Spence, 1999). In such contexts, supervisors frequently have direct contact with each employee, which allow for the establishment of closer personal relationships between them. In fact, in some cases supervisors might even adopt the role of co-workers (Marlow & Patton, 2001). Moreover, the lack of highly structured processes for example in recruiting and selection, frequently allow supervisors to value more those potential candidates who are acquaintances to join the organization, such as friends and family members. As Spence (1999) points out, in such cases a feeling of loyalty and trust prevails for communication between supervisor and employees is usually more open and honest. Thus, in these contexts characterized by closer relationships between supervi-

sors and employees, when an episode of relationship conflict among group members arises, it is considered legitimate for supervisors to intervene and attenuate the negative feelings involved. For instance, in situations of relationship conflict, supervisors can manage to reduce personal discrepancies among employees and feelings of anxiety by implementing norms that limit the expression of inappropriate emotions (Ury, 1991). For all the reasons mentioned above, we propose:

H1: *PSS will buffer the negative link between relationship conflict and job satisfaction, such that the higher the levels of PSS, the less negative this relationship will be.*

### The moderating role of PCS

PCS consists of the extent to which an employee perceives the provision of desirable resources by his or her co-workers, including task-directed helping (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975), co-worker mentoring (Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001), and friendliness or positive affect (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). As previously mentioned, in the context of small business due to less formalized structures and resources available, often employees end up carrying out a variety of unexpected tasks for adapting to the demands of organizations. In such situations, the support of co-workers who have already developed similar tasks is of paramount importance for reducing role ambiguity. Furthermore, in such small business context, employees are usually more socially motivated and tend to look for friendly relationships with colleagues.

The support provided by co-workers differs from that provided by supervisors in many aspects. First, hierarchy places a different meaning to the relationship between supervisors and employees, because hierarchy is attributed to authority ranking as opposed to equality matching (Fiske, 1992). Therefore, although in the context of small business the relationship between supervisors and employees are usually close, hierarchy still exists. On the contrary, because co-workers exchanges are based on reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and turn-taking (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), employees tend to seek advice and help to carry out a task primarily from co-workers for their perceived similarity (Gibson, 2003; Morrison, 1993; Seers, 1989). Furthermore, the types of power attributed to supervisors and co-workers are also different and consequently shape the perceptions of support provided by both. Supervisors have more formal power (i.e. strength) in hierarchical organizations such as small businesses, and are frequently charged with both legal and moral responsibility (French & Raven, 1959). On the other hand, experienced co-workers are more frequently per-

ceived as sources of reference and expert power (i.e. knowledge) (Tucker, Chmiel, Turner, Hershcovis, & Stride, 2008).

All in all, employees are more likely to interact with their co-workers (Ferris & Mitchell, 1987) for peer-to-peer communication is most of the times more salient than communication with supervisors (Westaby & Lowe, 2005). Thus, issues such as how to carry out certain tasks are more likely to be raised and discussed among co-workers because of their close proximity to the same problems. In collaborative and supportive contexts, some authors have pointed out that arguments about working procedures (i.e. task conflict) are less likely to lead to negative consequences (Simons & Peterson, 2000). As Jehn and Shah (1997) indicate, the existence of friendship between group members seems to be related to improved communication channels, which in turn influences the creative resolution of conflicts and increases group members' commitment. Following these arguments, we propose:

H2: *PCS will buffer the negative link between task conflict and job satisfaction, such that the higher the levels of PCS, the less negative this relationship will be.*

### Method

#### Participants and procedure

A public organization provided us with access to the sample composed by employees from small businesses in the province of Seville (Andalucia, Spain). After receiving proper training, assistants from this organization applied the questionnaires to volunteer participants in small businesses from all the different economic sectors found in the province of Seville: Mining and quarrying; manufacturing; repair and installation of machinery and equipments; electricity, gas and water supply; retail trade and repair of vehicles; hotels and restaurants; transport, storage and communication; financial intermediation; real state, renting and business activities; education; health and social work; other community, social and personal service activities; and private households with employed persons. The anonymity of employees and their corresponding work organization was guaranteed.

The study involved 288 participants (167 female, 121 male), on average age of 35.41 years old ($SD$ = 6.88), 83.9% of whom worked in organizations with less than 10 employees and 16.31% worked in organizations with between 11 and 50 employees. About half of the participants (64.1%) received higher education (university or vocational education) while 55.9% had only completed lower education (primary and secondary school). Regarding the job position distribution, 61.2% were blue-collars, 30.8% middle-management and only 8.0% of participants were in upper-level management posi-

tions or other. Finally, the average organizational tenure was 10.56 years (range 0 - 48, $SD$ = 7.83).

### Measures

All reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha values) for the measures used are reported in Table 1.

*Relationship conflict.* It was used a Spanish version of the Cox's (1998) 5-item "Organizational Conflict Scale" to assess relationship conflict, adapted by Medina et al. (2005). One sample item is: "The atmosphere here is often charged with hostility". Each item was cast on a 4-point response format (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). The higher the score, the higher the level of relationship conflict experienced.

*Task conflict.* It was used a Spanish version of the Jehn's (1995) 4-item scale for measuring task conflict, adapted by Medina, Munduate, Dorado, Martínez, and Guerra (2005). One sample item is: "People you work with often have different opinions about the work being done". Each item was cast on a 4-point response format (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). The higher the score, the higher the level of task conflict experienced.

*Perceived supervisor support (PSS).* It was used the validated Spanish version of the supervisor social support scale component of the Job Content Questionnaire (Karasek, 1985). One sample item is: "My supervisor is helpful in getting the job done". Each item was cast on a 4-point response format (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). The higher the score, the higher the level of perceived supervisor support.

*Perceived co-worker support (PCS).* It was used the validated Spanish version of the co-worker social support scale component of the Job Content Questionnaire (Karasek, 1985). One sample item is: "People I work with take a personal interest in me". Each item was cast on a 4-point response format (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). The higher the score, the higher the level of perceived co-worker support.

*Job satisfaction.* It was used a 5-item Spanish version from the "Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire" (Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1965) adapted to Spanish by Peiró et al. (1993). This scale measures employee's level of satisfaction with some extrinsic aspects of their jobs (e.g. salary and supervision), as well as their general levels of job satisfaction. One sample item is: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your job?". Each item was cast on a 5-point response format (1 = *not satisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*).

### Results

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients and Pearson correlations of the study variables. As presented in Table 1, alpha values for each scale exceeded the cut-off point of .70 suggested by Nunally (1978), so the reliability coefficients of our measures were good to excellent. In Table 1, several significant correlations can be observed. In general, effect sizes were moderate (Cohen, 1988). Notably, the relationship between relationship and task conflict was moderately positive ($r$ = .36, $p$ < .01), which suggests discriminant validity between the two types of conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). As expected, relationship conflict was negatively related to job satisfaction ($r$ = -.40, $p$ < .05). Surprisingly, task conflict and job satisfaction share a small non-significant negative relationship ($r$ = -.09, n.s.); this result is further discussed. On the other hand, both PSS and PCS are positively related to job satisfaction (PSS, $r$ = .56, $p$ < .01; PCS, $r$ = .38, $p$ < .01), and notably the correlation between PSS and job satisfaction was the strongest found in our study (Cohen, 1988).

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined whether several demographics affected our study variables. For this aim, we conducted three ANOVAs on relationship conflict, task conflict, supervisor support and co-worker support, including gender, educational level and job position as factors (post-hoc analyses were conducted using Bonferroni $t$ tests). We found differences for task conflict and job satisfaction only. Specifically, we found that men perceived more task conflict than women ($F$ (1, 283) = 4. 06, $p$ < .05; Male $M$ = 2.47, $SD$ = .73 vs. Female $M$ = 2.29, $SD$ = .77), and that employees in blue-collar and middle-management job positions reported less job satisfaction than employees in upper-level management positions ($F$ (1, 277) = 3. 52, $p$ < .05; Blue-collar $M$ = 3.18, $SD$ = .69; Middle-management $M$ = 3.18, $SD$ = .68; *vs.* Upper-level management $M$ = 3.70, $SD$ = .71). Thus, for testing our hypotheses we controlled for these two demographics (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Coefficients and Pearson Correlations for the Study Variables

| Variable | $M$ | $SD$ | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Relationship conflict | 1.70 | 0.76 | (.89) | | | | |
| 2. Task conflict | 2.36 | 0.76 | .36** | (.83) | | | |
| 3. PSS | 2.81 | 0.89 | -.42** | -.16** | (.90) | | |
| 4. PCS | 3.38 | 0.64 | -.33** | -.09 | .47** | (.86) | |
| 5. Job satisfaction | 3.22 | 0.70 | -.40** | -.09 | .56** | .38** | (.70) |

Note: PCS = Perceived co-worker support; PSS = Refers to perceived supervisor support. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) are listed in the diagonal. **$p$ < .01 (two-tailed); *$p$ < .05 (two-tailed).

Table 2. Effect of Relationship Conflict on Job Satisfaction Moderated by Perceived Supervisor Support

| Variable | $B$ | $SE\ B$ | $\beta$ | $R^2$ | $\Delta R^2$ | $\Delta F$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Step 1 | | | | .02 | .02 | 2.71 |
| Gender | -.04 | .07 | -.03 | | | |
| Job position | .10 | .05 | .10* | | | |
| Step 2 | | | | .36 | .34 | 73.12*** |
| RC | -.14 | .05 | -.15** | | | |
| PSS | .36 | .04 | .45*** | | | |
| Step 3 | | | | .38 | .02 | 6.86** |
| RC x PSS | .12 | .05 | .14** | | | |

Note: Final coefficients provided for Step 3. RC = Relationship conflict; PSS = Perceived supervisor support. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.

Table 3. Effect of Task Conflict on Job Satisfaction Moderated by Perceived Co-worker Support

| Variable | $B$ | $SE\ B$ | $\beta$ | $R^2$ | $\Delta R^2$ | $\Delta F$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Step 1 | | | | .02 | .02 | 2.74 |
| Gender | -.06 | .08 | -.04 | | | |
| Job position | .17 | .06 | .16** | | | |
| Step 2 | | | | .17 | .15 | 25.42*** |
| TC | -.06 | .05 | -.07 | | | |
| PCS | .42 | .06 | .39*** | | | |
| Step 3 | | | | .19 | .02 | 4.94* |
| TC x PCS | .17 | .08 | .12* | | | |

Note: Final coefficients provided for Step 3. PCS = Perceived co-worker support; TC = Task conflict; ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.
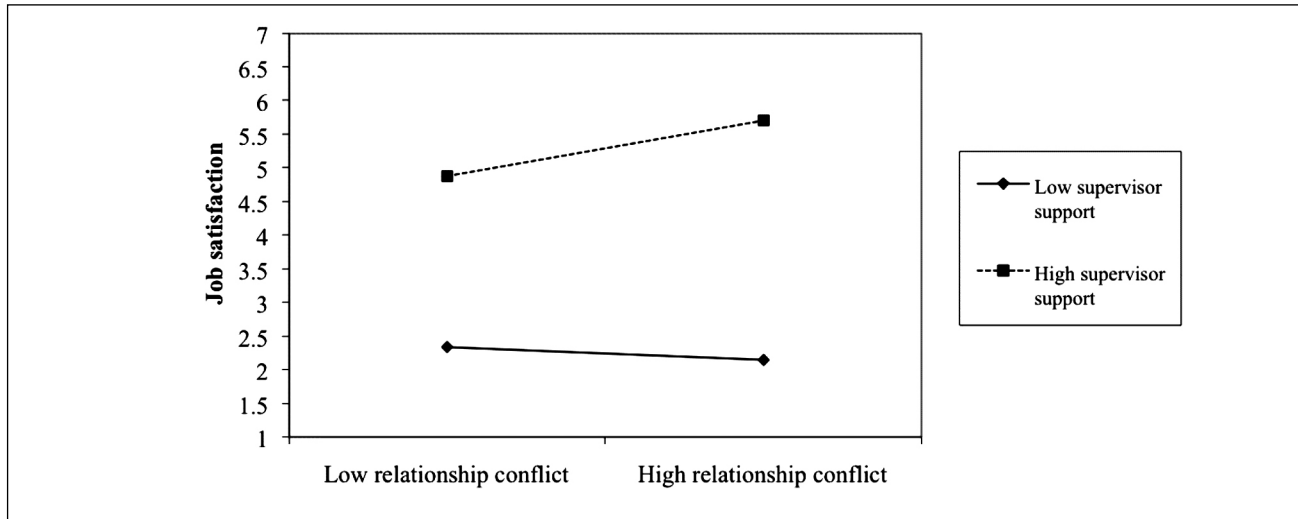
In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted two separate hierarchical regression analysis for our aim was to estimate the unique contribution of each type of conflict (relationships vs. task) and the associated perceived source of support (PSS vs. PCS) in relation to employees' job satisfaction. In order to reduce multicollinearity effects, all variables used to compute the regression equations were mean centered, for both estimating the main effects as well as the interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991).

Our hypothesis 1 suggested that PSS would moderate the negative link between relationship conflict and job satisfaction. The results of a hierarchical regression analysis are displayed in Table 2. As can be observed, in step 1 gender and job position were entered as controls. In step 2, mean centered scores for relationship conflict and PSS were entered for estimating main effects on job satisfaction, which yielded 36% of explained variance. Confirming our expectations, the higher the levels of relationship conflict experienced, the less the levels of job satisfaction reported ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .001$), while in contrary, the higher the levels of PSS, the higher the levels of job satisfaction ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$). In step 3, the interaction term between relationship conflict and PSS was entered, which yielded a total of 38% of explained variance for job satisfaction ($\beta = .14$, $p < .01$). In order to test for the significance of the slope for this interaction term, we computed a simple slope test following

the procedure of Cohen and Cohen (1983). Accordingly, the interaction term was significant for both high levels as well as low levels of the moderator, i.e. at three $SD$ above the mean level (PSS = 5.48, $p < .05$) and three $SD$ below (PSS = 0.14, $p < .05$). Finally, as can be seen in Figure 1, job satisfaction increases when relationship conflict is combined with high levels of PSS and decreases when relationship conflict is combined with low levels of PSS.

As for hypothesis 2, we suggested that PCS would moderate the negative link between task conflict and job satisfaction. The results of the corresponding hierarchical regression analysis are displayed in Table 3. As can be observed, in step 1 gender and job position were entered as controls. In step 2, mean centered scores for task conflict and PCS were entered for estimating main effects on job satisfaction, which yielded 17% of explained variance. Contrary to our expectations, task conflict was not directly related to job satisfaction ($\beta = -.08$, n.s.). In turn, the higher the levels of PCS, the higher the levels of job satisfaction reported ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$), which accounted for 35% of explained variance for job satisfaction in step 2. In step 3, the interaction term between task conflict and PCS was entered, which yielded a total of 19% of explained variance for job satisfaction ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$). In order to test for the significance of the slope for this interaction term, we computed a simple slope test following the procedure of Cohen and Cohen (1983). Accor-

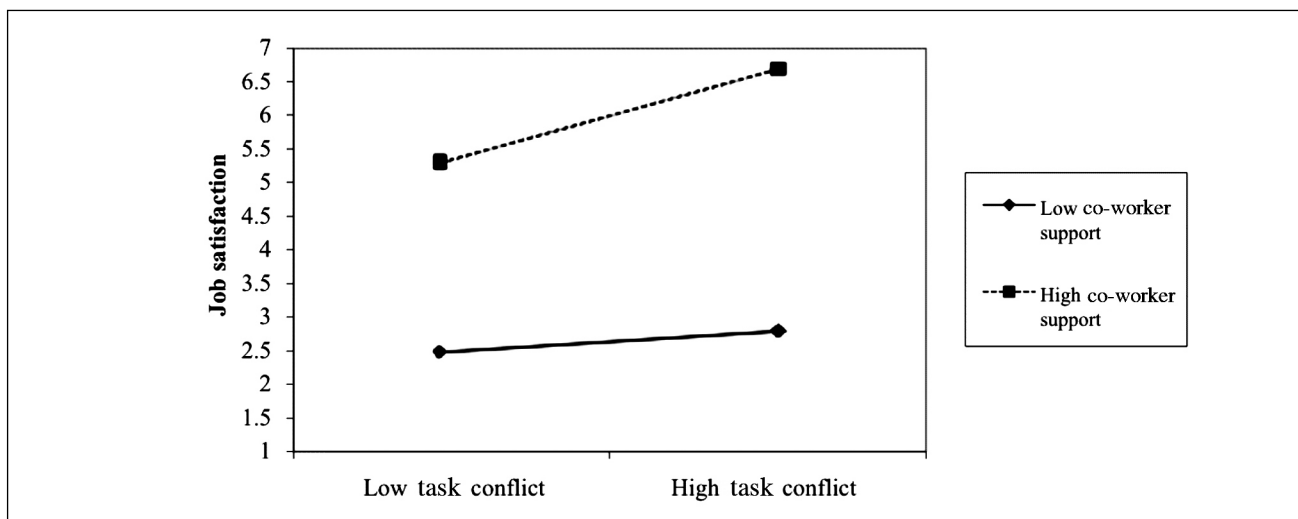Figure 1. Interaction Effect of Relationship Conflict and PSS on Job Satisfaction



dingly, the interaction term was significant for medium to high levels of the moderator, i.e. at mean level (PCS = 3.38, $p < .05$) and one $SD$ above the mean level (PCS = 4.02, $p < .05$). Finally, as can be seen in Figure 2, job satisfaction increases when task conflict is combined with high levels of PCS.

Following the procedure and parameters established by Cohen (1992), we calculated the effect sizes for the proportion of variance explained by the two estimated models hypothesized for explaining employees' job satisfaction. Accordingly, we confirmed that the effect size for the model estimating job satisfaction from relationship conflict, PSS and the interaction between both ($R^2 = .38$; $f^2 = .61$) is significantly larger than that of the model encompassing task conflict and PCS and the respective interactive term ($R^2 = .19$; $f^2 = .23$), which is regarded a medium effect size.

## Discussion

In this study, our aim was to analyze the relationship between two types of interpersonal conflict at work (relationship and task conflict) and job satisfaction in the context of small business, focusing on the buffering role that different sources of social support (supervisors and co-workers) may play in this relationship depending on the type of conflict experienced. Adopting such a contingent perspective our main findings show that, first, PSS buffers the link between relationship conflict and job satisfaction while PCS moderates the link between task conflict and job satisfaction, and second, that the model estimating the influence of PSS and relationship conflict is relatively more important for predicting employees' job satisfaction than the model that relates PCS and task conflict with

Figure 2. Interaction Effect of Task Conflict and PCS on Job Satisfaction

the same outcome. All in all, our study makes a few contributions to research on small businesses and interpersonal conflict at work, two streams that traditionally have been developed separately, and finally highlight important practical implications for the field of Human Resource Management.

As expected, our results confirm the detrimental effect of relationship conflict on job satisfaction, in line with a number of studies that showed that relationship conflict decreases employees' well-being, including job satisfaction and burnout (Benítez et al., 2008; Boz et al., 2009; De Dreu et al., 2004). Relationship conflicts are synonyms of interpersonal animosity or annoyance among group members (Jehn, 1995; 1997), and are related to negative feelings of frustration and anxiety (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). In this sense, relationship conflicts happen to create feelings of non-belongingness and exclusion among group members, which in turn lead to decreased job satisfaction (Boz et al., 2009; Medina et al., 2005). As previously mentioned, in the context of small business, it is crucial for members to share similar values (Lansberg, 1998) for such personal discrepancies may cause members to feel excluded and therefore less satisfied with their jobs.

One remarkable finding relates to the moderating role of supervisor support on the negative link between relationship conflict and job satisfaction. In the context of small business, we found that when levels of PSS are high, relationship conflict does not hinder employees' job satisfaction. This finding is in line with those studies that found supervisors to be the most important source of social support when discrepancies at work escalate and relate to personal differences, due to their hierarchical position that in turn allow them to neutralize employees' complaints as well as help them in getting appropriate support (Boz et al., 2009; Shaw, Robertson, Pransky, & McLellan, 2003). This finding might be contingent upon the specific context of small business and therefore requires further investigation. In this sense, such finding opens a very interesting line for future research on the differentiation between sources of social support within small businesses. As previously mentioned, supervisors play a very salient role in small businesses because most of the times, owners are also the ones responsible for coordinating the work very closely and for disseminating the values and ideas all employees are expected to share.

Notably in our study, task conflict is not directly (positive or negative) related to job satisfaction. However, when employees perceive high levels of co-worker support, this type of conflict becomes positively related to job satisfaction. These results are in line with previous studies (Jehn, 1997; Behfar, Mannix, Peterson, & Trochim, 2011) and give support for the contingent perspective in recent conflict management research (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Illies et al., 2010). According to such perspective, task conflict does not necessarily increase or decrease employees'

satisfaction (Behfar et al., 2008), but depending on contextual factors, a commonly expected negative effect of task conflict on affective variables such as job satisfaction or well-being could actually reverse and become positive (Benítez, Medina, & Munduate, 2011; Guerra et al., 2005; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Medina, Munduate, Martínez, Dorado, & Mañas, 2004; Tjosvold, 2008). Cooperation among group members for managing all types of conflict in a positive manner was suggested by Chen, Liu and Tjosvold (2005), as key to build constructive controversy. Likewise, integration and problem solving have been considered two positive outcomes stemming from the learning process employees go through when managing conflicts at work (van de Vliert, Euwema, & Huismaus, 1995).

Specifically in our study, we found that high levels of co-worker support contribute to increase employees' job satisfaction in task conflict situations. This result is consistent with the findings of other research that found task conflict to be beneficial for employees when it takes place in positive contexts, characterized by high levels of trust between parties (Tjosvold, 2008). In the context of small business, employees are more socially motivated and collaboration among co-workers happens frequently, both for seeking help to achieve goals as well as solving discrepancies when task conflict arises. PCS is based on collaboration and trust (Lau & Linden, 2008), which help employees to face task conflict for the provision of task-directed helping (Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrinson, & Pinneau, 1975) and co-worker mentoring (Ensher et al., 2001). Importantly, PCS and interpersonal trust facilitate social exchange relationships (Blau, 1964), so that when co-workers trust one another, they are more willing to help and offer support because they know that their colleagues are likely to reciprocate such support in the future (Gouldner, 1960). In such occasions, to successfully manage task conflicts may increase employees' job satisfaction due to the positive feelings derived from having worked together in a team to overcome difficulties.

Remarkably, our results show that the link between relationship conflict and PSS is more powerful in explaining employees' job satisfaction than task conflict and PCS together. Once more, this finding can be attributed to the particular dynamics of small businesses, characterized by simple structures, prevailing social motivation and highly centralized mechanisms of control (Mintzberg, 1980). As previously mentioned, in small businesses, good and fluid interpersonal relationships are key to maintain high levels of well-being among employees not only for the high importance attributed to positive relationships in such contexts, but also for the degree of trust and cooperation required when employees have to constantly perform different tasks. Noteworthy, this finding is consonant

with previous research that has consistently demonstrated that relationship conflict exerts a stronger influence on employees' well-being than does task conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Furthermore, in such contexts, supervisors play a more salient role in influencing employees' attitudes and behaviors than co-workers, for their closeness in relationships but yet representation of authority and power. In this sense, the support provided by supervisors are likely to be perceived as more valuable and unique than that provided by co-workers, whom in such contexts are frequently quite similar both in hierarchy and distribution of tasks. Therefore, we believe that the unique link between relationship conflict and PSS with employees' job satisfaction in the context of small business makes the interaction between both aspects a more important antecedent of job satisfaction than task conflict and PCS.

Finally, another interesting finding consists of the relatively low levels of task and relationship conflict reported in our study. One possible explanation for this result is that small businesses are most of the times family-owned organizations where members tend to develop similar interests and perspectives in such a way that consensus in relation to a variety of issues is frequently achieved. In this regard, it has been found that homogeneity among employees can contribute to reduce general levels of perceived conflict at work (Davis & Haverston, 2001). Insofar, as our results show, the negative consequences of relationship conflict can still be quite salient even when experienced in relatively low levels, especially due to the importance attributed to social relationships in the context of small business.

All in all, although a number of previous studies have analyzed the effects of conflict on employees, most of them have been conducted in large organizations or using students' samples. To our knowledge, this is the first study to address the specific context of small business. For a number of reasons, small businesses are very different from large organizations in nature and dynamics, which consequently influence (as this study demonstrates) the type and prevalence of interpersonal conflicts that are experienced in such organizations.

### Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, the present study has methodological limitations that need to be discussed. First, this study uses a cross-sectional design and therefore cannot provide information about causality concerning the relationship between conflict types and job satisfaction. As recently pointed out, longitudinal designs are still lacking for much of the research on conflict types and well-being in general (Greer, Jehn, & Mannix, 2008). Importantly, conflict research has shown that conflict is a process that unfolds over time (Wall & Callister,

1995) and suggests that it has more negative than positive consequences for employees' well-being in the short run than over time (Peterson & Behfar, 2003). Moreover, there is evidence that not only conflict affects well-being but also low levels of well-being may promote more conflict at the workplace (De Dreu et al., 2004). In this sense, we believe that the use of longitudinal designs could contribute to a more accurate understanding of how conflict types influence well-being over time (or vice versa) and which specific role different sources of social support may play in these relationships.

Second, although many researchers emphasize relationship and task conflict, another relevant type of conflict that could have been included in our study is the process conflict (Greer et al., 2008), defined as "disagreements about assignments of duties and resources" (Jehn, 1997, p. 540). Nevertheless, recent research suggests that the existing measure for this type of conflict still requires further development as it failed to demonstrate discriminant validity from that used to capture task conflict (Behfar, Mannix, Peterson, & Trochim, 2011).

Third, as all study variables were collected from the same source, there is a potential risk for common-method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, we know that common-method bias is a less compelling causal explanation when moderating effects are found (Evans, 1985). Moreover, we have used person-centered scores for interactive effect analyses, therefore eliminating the influence of individual differences in response tendencies that typically inflate relationships between self-rated scores (Illies et al., 2010).

Finally, in this study we have used a general social support measure, that does not distinguish between social support types. We believe for future studies it would be also worth exploring how different types of support at work (emotional, informational and material) provided from different sources (supervisors and co-workers) moderate the relationship between conflict types and employees' job satisfaction.

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