

# Role of Commitment to the Supervisor, Leader–Member Exchange, and Supervisor-Based Self-Esteem in Employee–Supervisor Conflicts

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**ABSTRACT.** Using survey data from 240 employees working in a variety of organizations, the authors examined the relations among commitment to the supervisor, leader–member exchange, supervisor-based self-esteem (SBSE), and relationship and substantive supervisor–subordinate conflicts. They found affective commitment was negatively related to both types of conflicts; perceived lack of alternatives commitment was positively related to relationship conflicts; and leader–member exchange was negatively related to substantive conflicts. SBSE was negatively associated with both types of conflicts. In addition, when SBSE was low, affective commitment was more strongly related to both types of conflicts, and normative commitment more strongly and positively related to substantive conflicts. The authors discuss the implications of these findings for the understanding of employee–supervisor conflicts.

**Keywords:** commitment, conflicts, leader–member exchange, supervisor-based self-esteem

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A SUBSTANTIAL AMOUNT OF RESEARCH has been dedicated to conflicts in teams (e.g., Janssen, Van de Vliert, & Veenstra, 1999; Jehn, 1995; Simons & Peterson, 2000). This research has mainly addressed disagreements and incompatibilities among coworkers. In contrast, there has been a lack of attention given to conflicts between employees and supervisors (Rahim, 2002; Xin & Pelled, 2003). Thus, more research is needed to get a better understanding of the predictors of such dyadic conflicts. In particular, the contribution of partners' attitudes toward one another in explaining conflicts is not well understood. The purpose of the present study was to examine the contribution of

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employee commitment to the supervisor, supervisor-based self-esteem (SBSE), and leader–member exchange (LMX) to the perceived importance of supervisor–subordinate conflicts.

### *Employee–Supervisor Conflicts*

Conflicts are defined as interactive processes manifested by incompatibilities, disagreements, or dissonance in or between social entities (Rahim, 2002). Past studies of supervisor–subordinate conflicts have largely focused on role conflict (e.g., Odriscoll & Beehr, 1994) or work–family conflict (e.g., Allen, 2001; van Daalen, Willemsen, & Sanders, 2006) rather than on interpersonal conflict. Although some researchers (e.g., Howat & London, 1980; Rahim & Buntzman, 1989) have addressed this topic, their focus was on partners' styles of handling conflicts rather than on the conflict itself. However, the study of supervisor–subordinate conflicts appears legitimate, given that researchers have shown supervisors' reports of dyadic conflicts to predict subordinates' assessments of leadership behaviors (Xin & Pelled, 2003).

Prior researchers have generally distinguished between two types of conflicts (e.g., Jehn, 1995; Rahim, 2002; Simons & Peterson, 2000). First, *relationship conflicts* (also labeled emotional, socioemotional, or affective conflicts) refer to interpersonal incompatibilities, which typically include tension, annoyance, and animosity between the individuals involved in the conflict (Jehn). Examples of relationship conflicts are conflicts about interpersonal styles, values, or personal tastes (De Dreu, van Dierendonck, & Dijkstra, 2004). Second, *substantive conflicts* (also called issue or task conflicts) refer to differences regarding ideas, opinions, and viewpoints concerning the task to be performed (Jehn; Rahim). Conflicts over the distribution of resources and the interpretation of facts or procedures are good examples of substantive conflicts (De Dreu et al.). Prior studies in team settings have indicated positive correlations between relationship and substantive conflicts (Rahim; Simons & Peterson), which can be explained by individuals' propensity to use harsh task conflict tactics that result in relationship conflicts over time (Pelled, 1996; Simons & Peterson). Regarding the prevalence of these two types of conflicts in supervisor–subordinate relationships, Evan (1965) found that technical and administrative issues—which fall into the category of substantive conflicts—were the major topics of disagreements between employees and their supervisors, whereas he observed few instances of conflict resulting from personality clashes or barriers to interpersonal communication (i.e., relationship conflicts). Renwick (1975) obtained similar results. He found that the most frequent topics of dyadic conflict were organizational policies and procedures and differing views on working situations, whereas topics dealing with more personal issues and matters were less frequent.

Consequences of interpersonal conflicts at work are diverse. If poorly managed, they can have negative effects on health and well-being, such as burnout and

psychosomatic complaints, particularly in the case of relationship conflicts (De Dreu et al., 2004). Relationship conflicts have also been shown to impede group performance and hinder satisfaction (e.g., Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). However, research indicates that a moderate level of substantive conflict is generally associated with better decision making and higher team performance (Jehn; Rahim, 2002; Simons & Peterson, 2000). But given the positive correlation between the two types of conflicts, efforts to stimulate potentially beneficial substantive conflicts run the risk of triggering detrimental relationship conflicts (Rahim; Simons & Peterson). By focusing on the predictors of supervisor–subordinate conflicts, the present study provides cues for how to prevent them as needed. We intended to investigate the effects of commitment to the supervisor, SBSE, and LMX on supervisor–subordinate conflicts.

### *The Three-Component Model of Commitment*

*Commitment* is a global psychological state that characterizes the relationship between employees and organizations (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The focal behavior associated with commitment is the decision to maintain membership in the organization (i.e., decision to stay; Meyer & Allen; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). According to Meyer and Allen, there are three forms of commitment. First, affective commitment (AC) corresponds to an employee's emotional attachment to, involvement in, and identification with the organization. Second, normative commitment (NC) is based on a moral obligation to remain loyal. Third, continuance commitment (CC) is an attachment derived from the recognition of the costs associated with leaving or the perception of a lack of employment alternatives. CC subsumes two subdimensions (Bentein, Vandenberg, Vandenberghe, & Stinglhamber, 2005; Jaros, 1997; McGee & Ford, 1987; Stinglhamber, Bentein, & Vandenberghe, 2002): (a) perceived high sacrifice (HiSac), which refers to the personal sacrifice associated with exiting the organization and (b) lack of alternatives (LoAlt), which reflects the perception of a lack of alternative employment opportunities. Researchers have shown these forms of organizational commitment to predict, to various degrees, a number of behaviors, including intent to stay, turnover, performance, absenteeism, stress, and health (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002).

Researchers have shown the three-component model of organizational commitment to apply to a variety of targets (e.g., Clugston, Howell, & Dorfman 2000; Snape & Redman, 2003; Stinglhamber et al., 2002). In fact, as employees tend to engage in distinct exchange relationships with internal (e.g., supervisor, work unit) and external (e.g., profession, customers) entities, they also tend to develop distinct commitments toward these foci (Meyer, Allen, & Topolnytsky, 1998; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). We focused on commitment to the supervisor, first explored by Becker and his colleagues (Becker, 1992; Becker & Billings, 1993; Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Becker & Kernan, 2003). However,

few studies have examined the various forms of commitment to the supervisor, as researchers have mainly focused on the affective dimension (e.g., Siders, George, & Dharwadkar, 2001; Vandenberghe, Bentein, & Stinglhamber, 2004). A few studies have taken into account the normative (Stinglhamber et al.) and HiSac (Becker & Kernan; Stinglhamber et al.) dimensions, but none has included LoAlt as a separate dimension of commitment to the supervisor. Therefore, an additional objective of this study was to extend and validate a 4-dimensional model of commitment to the supervisor. AC to the supervisor can be viewed as a sense of liking, identification, and involvement with the supervisor. NC reflects a sense of loyalty to one's supervisor on the basis of a feeling of obligation to him or her. HiSac refers to the cost of discontinuing the working relationship with one's supervisor, and LoAlt represents commitment to the supervisor derived from a perceived lack of alternative supervisors to work with in the organization.

Researchers have shown commitment to the supervisor to predict a variety of organization-related behaviors. Intended or actual turnover is one of the outcomes that are negatively related to the affective form of commitment to the supervisor (Becker, 1992; Boshoff & Mels, 2000; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003; Vandenberghe et al., 2004). Affective commitment to the supervisor also predicts in-role performance (Becker et al., 1996; Becker & Kernan, 2003; Siders et al., 2001) and extra-role or prosocial behaviors (Becker; Chen, Tsui, & Farh, 2002; Gregersen, 1993). Surprisingly, researchers have never explored the potential links between commitment to the supervisor and the nature of supervisor-subordinate relationships, particularly the conflicts that may occur in the context of these relationships.

As mentioned, research on the nature of conflicts has mainly focused on conflicts in teams. Previous researchers have generally reported a negative relationship among emotional conflicts and group satisfaction and commitment (Amason, 1996; Rahim, 2002; Thomas, Bliese, & Jex, 2005). For example, Jehn (1995) demonstrated that perceived relationship conflicts between group members were negatively related to liking other group members and intent to remain in the group. These results suggest a negative relationship between affective commitment to the supervisor and relationship conflicts at the dyadic level. In a related vein, substantive conflicts, aside from their positive effects on performance, are also related to lower levels of loyalty, liking coworkers, and intent to stay in the group, albeit less so than relationship conflicts (Jehn; Rahim). In addition, researchers have shown personal identification with the leader—which is comparable to affective commitment—to increase subordinates' propensity to interpret supervisors' interests as their own (Aron & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2001). Therefore, these shared interests should reduce the likelihood of substantive conflicts. We thus propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a ( $H_{1a}$ ): Affective commitment to the supervisor negatively relates to supervisor-subordinate relationship conflicts.

$H_{1b}$ : Affective commitment to the supervisor negatively relates to supervisor–subordinate substantive conflicts.

In addition to affective commitment to the supervisor, there are reasons to believe that LoAlt will also be related to relationship and substantive conflicts with the supervisor. But contrary to AC, we expect this relationship to be positive. Although LoAlt has been little studied in connection with the supervisor, the literature on organizational commitment indicates that this form of commitment is associated with a set of negative consequences. For example, researchers have shown LoAlt to be positively associated with intent to quit (e.g., Meyer et al., 2002; Stinglhamber et al., 2002). More generally, researchers have described CC as being associated with feelings of entrapment (e.g., Meyer et al.) and found that it is related to negative emotions (Mignonac & Herrbach, 2004) and stress (Meyer et al.). Following this logic, we expect LoAlt-based commitment to the supervisor to be positively associated with perceived emotional and substantive conflicts with the supervisor.

$H_{2a}$ : Perceived lack of alternatives positively relates to supervisor–subordinate relationship conflicts.

$H_{2b}$ : Perceived lack of alternatives positively relates to supervisor–subordinate substantive conflicts.

### *Leader–Member Exchange*

LMX reflects the direct, local, and interpersonal exchange between a supervisor (the leader) and his or her subordinate (the member; Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Inherent to LMX theory is the notion that supervisors tend to differentiate among subordinates (Dienesch & Liden, 1986): high LMX indicates high-quality exchanges between the supervisor and the subordinate, whereas low LMX reflects low-quality exchanges. A meta-analysis by Gerstner and Day (1997) revealed that LMX was positively related to performance ratings, satisfaction with supervision, and organizational commitment and negatively related to turnover intentions. Although this meta-analysis did not include supervisor–subordinate conflicts as a potential correlate of LMX, results suggest that a high-quality relationship with one's supervisor should shape the entire work experience in a positive manner.

Researchers have associated LMX quality with fewer conflicts and dyadic problems such as strains in the relationship (Dansereau et al., 1975; Howat & London, 1980; Keller & Dansereau, 1995). On the basis of social exchange theory, Keller and Dansereau argued that by adopting leadership practices indicative of high LMX, leaders foster subordinates' sense of empowerment. Empowered subordinates then reciprocate by engaging in exchange relationships typified by few dyadic problems. In addition, a study by Paglis and Green (2002) revealed that conflicts were more frequent when both partners considered the quality of the

relationship to be poor, whereas the frequency of conflicts reported by employees was lower for supervisor–subordinate dyads in which both partners judged the quality of the relationship to be good. Paglis and Green argued that in the latter case, there is more frequent or effective communication, and thus fewer conflicts or misunderstandings. Therefore, in the present study, we expected to find a similar pattern of findings, even though we examined these relationships in the context of both emotional and substantive conflicts.

$H_{3a}$ : LMX negatively relates to supervisor–subordinate relationship conflicts.

$H_{3b}$ : LMX negatively relates to supervisor–subordinate substantive conflicts.

### *SBSE*

*Generalized self-esteem* refers to an individual's self-evaluation of his or her value as a person (Coopersmith, 1967), or to "the individual's positive or negative attitude toward the self as a totality" (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995; p. 141). This attitude about oneself involves more than a cognitive exercise, as it also subsumes an affective component, reflecting a liking or disliking of oneself (Pelham & Swann, 1989; Rosenberg et al.). The self-esteem construct is conceptualized as a hierarchical concept. Thus, in addition to general self-esteem, scholars have investigated specific self-esteem facets such as self-esteem at the task or situation-specific level (e.g., Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Simpson & Boyle, 1975). Building on the hierarchical notion of self-esteem and to better predict organizational behaviors and attitudes, Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, and Dunham (1989) introduced the notion of organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), which refers to a self-evaluation of one's personal worth as an organizational member. High OBSE employees have come to believe that they matter to their organization. According to a recent review (Pierce & Gardner, 2004), OBSE's antecedents include organizational structure, practices and culture, and role conditions. Organizational citizenship behavior, job performance, intrinsic motivation, and job satisfaction count among the most important consequences of OBSE (Pierce & Gardner).

According to Lord and colleagues (Lord & Brown, 2001; Lord, Brown & Freiberg, 1999), given supervisors' status and power, they can profoundly influence subordinates' self-concepts—including self-esteem—through their actions, directly communicated information, and subtle affective messages that are communicated outside of conscious awareness. In fact, "leaders can affect followers by changing the way followers perceive themselves" (Lord et al., p. 168). However, D. van Knippenberg, B. van Knippenberg, De Cremer, and Hogg (2004) noted that *relational self-esteem*, which refers to self-evaluation integrating the relationship with one's supervisor, is unfortunately absent from the literature on leadership. Drawing on the idea that attitudes and behaviors are more strongly linked to a self-esteem concept that has the same level of specificity (Pierce

et al., 1989; Rosenberg et al., 1995), we argue that the concept of SBSE has high relevance for perceived supervisor–employee conflicts. Paralleling OBSE, we define SBSE as a self-evaluation of one’s worthiness resulting from the relationship with one’s supervisor. High SBSE employees are expected to feel important, valued, appreciated, and trusted by their supervisor. In contrast to OBSE, which refers to a diffuse entity (i.e., the organization) that can neither behave nor develop attitudes, SBSE is more focused, as it relates to one specific person, the supervisor. SBSE is also conceptually distinct from LMX, which taps into the quality of the social exchange in the dyadic relationship rather than into the individual’s self-concept.

Subordinates’ self-concepts, particularly when the self is defined at the relational level, are powerful determinants of their behaviors and reactions to supervisors (Lord & Brown, 2001; Lord et al., 1999). According to Korman’s (1970) self-consistency theory, individuals who hold a positive view of themselves tend to adopt positive behaviors and attitudes that are consistent with their self-image. This theory led us to predict that employees who feel important and valued by their supervisors will engage in harmonious relationships, and hence in fewer dyadic conflicts. In addition, since conflict is a shared reality, SBSE provides an indication of the extent to which supervisors will engage in dyadic conflicts. Given that high SBSE is the result of supervisors holding subordinates in high regard, it is expected that under high SBSE conditions, the likelihood of supervisor–employee conflicts will be reduced. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

- $H_{4a}$ : SBSE negatively relates to supervisor–subordinate relationship conflicts.  
 $H_{4b}$ : SBSE negatively relates to supervisor–subordinate substantive conflicts.

#### *Interactive Effects of SBSE and Commitment*

In addition to their main effects on dyadic conflicts, commitment and SBSE may interact in predicting these outcomes. More specifically, we expected SBSE to act as a moderator of the relationship between AC and dyadic conflicts. Brockner’s (1988) behavioral plasticity theory, which refers to the extent to which an individual is affected by external factors, provided the grounding for this prediction. Brockner theorized that there are differences in the degree to which individuals react to external cues and identified self-esteem as one of the factors affecting individuals’ level of reactivity. People with high self-esteem are less reactive because they are confident in their competence, whereas people with low self-esteem, because they feel more uncertain about the correctness of their behaviors and thoughts, are more prone to attend to external cues (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Thus, self-esteem can moderate the relation between external factors (e.g., work conditions) and employees’ behaviors and attitudes. This assertion applies to specific self-esteem as well. For example, researchers have shown

OBSE to moderate the relations among role conditions on the one part, and satisfaction and performance on the other (Pierce, Gardner, Dunham, & Cummings, 1993). Similarly, we predicted that low-self-esteem individuals would be more reactive to the climate and affective tone of the relationship they experienced with their supervisor and engage in more conflicts if their level of AC was low. Following this logic, the relationship between AC and conflicts should be stronger for low SBSE individuals than for high SBSE individuals.

In line with the aforementioned argument, we proposed the following hypotheses:

$H_{5a}$ : SBSE moderates the relationship between AC to the supervisor and relationship conflicts such that low levels of SBSE result in a stronger negative relationship between AC to the supervisor and relationship conflicts.

$H_{5b}$ : SBSE moderates the relationship between AC to the supervisor and substantive conflicts such that low levels of SBSE result in a stronger negative relationship between AC to the supervisor and substantive conflicts.

## Method

### *Sample and Procedure*

The sample consisted of 240 respondents. We collected data in two ways. First, we distributed questionnaires to 162 employed students who attended business-related courses in a French Canadian business school. Participants responded during class time, yielding a 94.2% response rate. In addition, we used the snowball technique to contact 78 additional employees. The snowball technique is based on asking first-contact respondents to fill in the survey and then pass along the information to their friends, relatives, and colleagues. We estimated the response rate for this subsample at 69.0%, for an overall response rate for the study of 84.2%. The average age of participants was 32.49 years ( $SD = 8.81$  years), and 64.3% were women. The average organizational tenure of participants was 4.75 years ( $SD = 5.78$  years), whereas the average dyadic tenure was 2.38 years ( $SD = 3.24$  years). A large variety of organizations was represented in the sample.

### *Measures*

*Conflicts.* We measured conflicts between the supervisor and the subordinate using eight items from Jehn's (1995) emotional and task conflict scales. We slightly modified Jehn's items to reflect supervisor-subordinate conflicts rather than conflicts among peers. Items were translated into French using a standard translation-back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). Four items captured relationship conflicts (e.g., "How much personality conflict is there between you and your

supervisor?”), and four items assessed substantive conflicts (e.g., “How frequently are there conflicts between you and your supervisor about ideas related to work?”). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*often*). For the relationship and substantive conflicts subscales, Cronbach’s alphas were .90 and .86, respectively. Note that the measures of conflicts were available only for the 162 employed students surveyed during class time.

*Commitment to the supervisor.* To measure the four dimensions of commitment to the supervisor, we used a modified French version of Stinglhamber et al.’s (2002) measure of commitment to supervisors in which we rewrote the CC items to reflect LoAlt and HiSac. We assessed AC ( $\alpha = .94$ ) using six items (e.g., “I appreciate my supervisor”) and measured NC ( $\alpha = .79$ ) through four items (e.g., “I would not leave my supervisor at this time because I feel obligated to him or her”). We also captured HiSac ( $\alpha = .73$ ) through three items (e.g., “I would not leave my current supervisor because of what I would stand to lose”), whereas we assessed LoAlt ( $\alpha = .57$ ) through three items (e.g., “I have no choice but to stay with my current supervisor”).

*LMX.* We assessed the quality of the relationship between the employee and his or her supervisor using the LMX-7 scale (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982), which was translated into French using a translation–back–translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). This scale is composed of seven items reflecting various aspects of the relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate, including working relationship effectiveness (e.g., “I would characterize my working relationship with my supervisor as extremely effective”), the supervisor’s recognition of the subordinate’s potential, willingness to support the subordinate, and understanding of the subordinate’s problems and needs. The LMX-7 scale displayed a good reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

*SBSE.* We adapted Pierce et al.’s (1989) OBSE measure to capture subordinates’ SBSE. The new measure was composed of eight items (e.g., “I am important for my supervisor,” “I am valuable for my supervisor,” “I count for my supervisor,” and “My supervisor trusts me”). The reliability for this scale was good in this study ( $\alpha = .95$ ). After being adapted, items were translated into French using a translation–back–translation procedure (Brislin, 1980).

We assessed items from the commitment, LMX, and SBSE scales using a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

## Results

As a preliminary step, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses of our key study variables. Because of the small sample size for these analyses,

we created three indicators per construct by combining the relevant items (Drasgow & Kanfer, 1985). This was done for constructs measured by more than three items. Table 1 shows the results of these analyses. Our hypothesized 8-factor solution yielded a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(224, N = 162) = 395.57, p = .01$ , nonnormed fit index (NNFI) = .97, comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .08, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07. Using a nested sequence approach (Bentler & Bonett, 1980), we compared this model with more parsimonious representations of the data, such as a number of alternative 7-factor models (cf. Table 1); a 6-factor model that merged AC, LMX, and SBSE; and a 1-factor model. As Table 1 shows, the hypothesized 8-factor model improved significantly over each of these alternative models ( $p = .01$ ). These results suggest that our eight variables of interest were distinguishable in this study. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables. All measures displayed good internal consistencies, with the exception of the LoAlt scale, which had a reliability of .57 and detracts from the recommended .70 threshold. Table 2 also reveals that hypothesized predictors of conflict correlated negatively with relationship and substantive conflicts, except for LoAlt, which was positively associated with these variables. In addition, consistent with past research (cf. Simons & Peterson, 2000), the correlation between the two types of conflicts was high in this study ( $r = .84$ ).

We used moderated multiple regression to examine main effects of commitment variables, LMX and SBSE, as well as interactive effects between commitments and SBSE on supervisor–employee conflicts. As recommended by Aiken and West (1991), we centered predictors prior to creating the interaction terms. We introduced control variables (age, sex, and dyadic tenure) in the first step and entered LMX, commitment variables, and SBSE in the second step. Last, in the third step, we introduced the interactive terms involving SBSE and commitment forms. Note that we conservatively tested interactions among all commitments and SBSE though our hypotheses dealt only with interactions between SBSE and the affective form of commitment. Table 3 displays the results of these analyses.

The full model was significant and explained a sizeable portion of the variance of relationship conflicts,  $F(13, 144) = 12.17, p < .001, R^2 = .52$ , and substantive conflicts,  $F(13, 144) = 11.24, p < .001, R^2 = .50$ . As previously mentioned, we entered our substantive variables in the second step. These variables accounted for significant increments in the variance of relationship conflicts and substantive conflicts ( $\Delta R^2 = .44, p < .001$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .42, p < .001$ , respectively). LMX was unrelated to relationship conflicts ( $\beta = -.09, ns$ ) yet positively related to substantive conflicts ( $\beta = -.24, p < .05$ ). Thus,  $H_{3a}$  was rejected, whereas  $H_{3b}$  was supported. AC was significantly related to both types of conflict ( $\beta = -.32, p < .01$ ;  $\beta = -.33, p < .01$ , respectively), thereby supporting  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$ . However, LoAlt was positively related to relationship conflicts ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ ) yet unrelated to substantive conflicts ( $\beta = .11, ns$ ). Thus,  $H_{2a}$  was supported, whereas

TABLE 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Substantive Variables: Fit Indexes

Model	$\chi^2$	df	NNFI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
Hypothesized 8-factor solution	395.57	224	.97	.98	.08	.07	—	—
7-factor								
Combining AC and LMX	543.53	231	.95	.96	.09	.10	147.96	7
Combining AC and SBSE	717.02	231	.93	.94	.10	.13	321.45	7
Combining LMX and SBSE	531.53	231	.96	.96	.09	.11	135.96	7
Combining relationship and substantive conflicts	440.83	231	.97	.98	.08	.08	45.26	7
Combining AC and NC	456.05	231	.97	.97	.09	.08	60.48	7
Combining HiSac and LoAlt	456.66	231	.97	.98	.08	.08	61.09	7
6-factor (combining AC, LMX, and SBSE)	791.58	237	.92	.93	.09	.14	396.01	13
1-factor	1467.87	252	.83	.85	.13	.23	1072.30	28

*Note.* NNFI = nonnormed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; AC = affective commitment; NC = normative commitment; HiSac = perceived high sacrifice; LoAlt = perceived lack of alternatives; LMX = leader-member exchange; and SBSE = supervisor-based self-esteem. All  $\chi^2$  are significant at  $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	32.49	8.81	—										
2. Sex	1.36	0.48	.10	—									
3. Tenure with supervisor	2.38	3.24	.22**	-.03	—								
4. Leader-member exchange	3.33	0.95	.06	-.11	.07	—							
5. Affective commitment	3.10	1.10	.06	-.22**	.05	.75**	—						
6. Normative commitment	2.41	1.03	-.05	-.13	.09	.38**	.55**	—					
7. Perceived high sacrifice	2.62	1.08	-.10	-.05	.09	.36**	.47**	.55**	—				
8. Perceived lack of alternatives	2.34	0.88	.08	.00	.07	-.14*	-.11	.18**	.17**	—			
9. Supervisor-based self-esteem	3.67	0.89	.04	-.00	.10	.77**	.62**	.32*	.30**	-.11	—		
10. Relationship conflicts	1.90	0.89	-.09	.08	.02	-.55**	-.53**	-.17*	-.14	.17*	-.57**	—	
11. Substantive conflicts	2.31	0.89	-.08	.07	-.01	-.57**	-.54**	-.17*	-.16*	.16*	-.52**	.84**	—

Note. *N* = 162-240, for sex, 1 = female, 2 = male. Tenure with supervisor was measured in years. All other scales were assessed using a 5-point response scale. Alpha coefficients are reported in parentheses along the diagonal.  
\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

**TABLE 3. Moderated Multiple Regression Analysis for Relationship and Substantive Conflicts**

Variable entered	Relationship conflicts				Substantive conflicts			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Step 1				.02				.01
Age	-0.02	.01	-.11		-0.01	.01	-.10	
Sex	0.18	.15	.10		0.16	.15	.08	
Tenure with supervisor	0.01	.02	.04		0.00	.02	.01	
Step 2				.44***				.42***
Affective commitment	-0.27	.10	-.32**		-0.28	.10	-.33**	
Normative commitment	0.10	.08	.11		0.13	.08	.14	
Perceived high sacrifice	0.09	.07	.11		0.06	.07	.07	
Perceived lack of alternatives	0.13	.06	.13*		0.11	.06	.11	
Leader-member exchange	-0.08	.11	-.09		-0.21	.11	-.24*	
SBSE	-0.38	.09	-.39***		-0.21	.10	-.22*	
Step 3				.06***				.07***
SBSE $\times$ Affective Commitment	0.28	.07	.36***		0.33	.07	.43***	
SBSE $\times$ Normative Commitment	-0.12	.09	-.12		-0.19	.09	-.20*	
SBSE $\times$ Perceived High Sacrifice	-0.00	.06	-.00		-0.02	.06	-.02	
SBSE $\times$ Perceived Lack of Alternatives	-0.08	.07	-.07		-0.00	.07	-.00	

*Note.* For sex, 1 = female, 2 = male. SBSE = Supervisor-based self-esteem. For relationship conflicts: Step 1,  $F(3, 154) = 0.93$ , *ns*; Step 2,  $F(9, 148) = 14.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Step 3,  $F(13, 144) = 12.17$ ,  $p < .001$ . For substantive conflicts: Step 1:  $F(3, 154) = 0.70$ , *ns*; Step 2,  $F(9, 148) = 12.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Step 3,  $F(13, 144) = 11.24$ ,  $p < .001$ .  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

$H_{2b}$  was rejected. Last, as predicted by  $H_{4a}$  and  $H_{4b}$ , SBSE was significantly and negatively related to relationship ( $\beta = -.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and substantive conflicts ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

As indicated in Table 3, interaction terms explained 6% and 7% unique variance in relationship and substantive conflicts, respectively, which compares favorably with effect sizes traditionally reported for moderator effects in applied research ( $R^2 = .01-.03$ ; cf. Champoux & Peters, 1987; Chaplin, 1991). The interaction between AC and SBSE significantly predicted relationship ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and substantive conflicts ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). To understand the form of these interactions, we plotted the regression lines of relationship and substantive conflicts on AC at 1 standard deviation below and 1 standard deviation above the

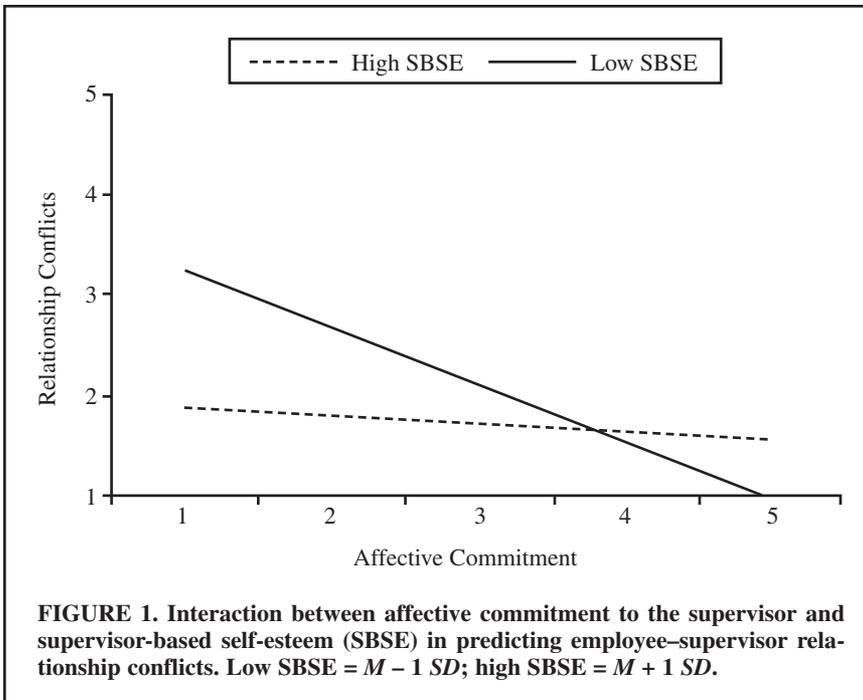
mean of SBSE (cf. Aiken & West, 1991). Figures 1 and 2 provide the graphic depiction of these interactions. The regression line for AC on relationship conflicts was significantly negative under conditions of low SBSE,  $t(144) = -5.92$ ,  $p < .001$ , but nonsignificant under conditions of high SBSE,  $t(144) = -0.60$ , *ns*. Posthoc probing of this interaction showed that the slopes of the regression lines differed significantly from each other,  $t(144) = 3.93$ ,  $p < .001$ . This yielded support for  $H_{5a}$ . The regression line for AC on substantive conflicts was also significantly negative when SBSE was low,  $t(144) = -5.09$ ,  $p < .001$ , but nonsignificant when SBSE was high,  $t(144) = -0.24$ , *ns*. Post hoc probing of this interaction showed that the slopes of the regression lines differed significantly from each other,  $t(144) = 4.70$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus,  $H_{5b}$  was also supported.

Table 3 also indicates that NC interacted with SBSE in predicting substantive conflicts ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which was unexpected. Figure 3 represents the regression lines for NC on substantive conflicts at 1 standard deviation below and 1 standard deviation above the mean of SBSE (cf. Aiken & West, 1991). The regression line was significantly positive under conditions of low SBSE,  $t(144) = 2.84$ ,  $p < .01$ , but nonsignificant under conditions of high SBSE,  $t(144) = 0.14$ , *ns*. Post hoc probing of this interaction showed that the slopes of the regression lines differed significantly from each other,  $t(144) = 2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ . These results suggest that low SBSE employees were more likely to engage in substantive conflicts as their NC to the supervisor increased.

## Discussion

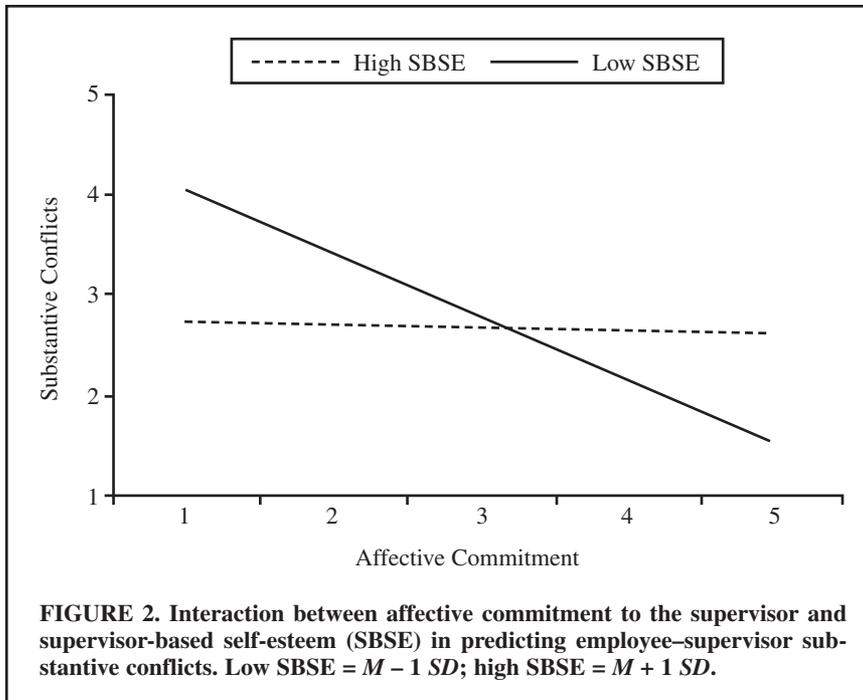
The aim of this study was to examine the relations among LMX, commitment to the supervisor, and SBSE; and perceived importance of relationship (i.e., incompatibilities related to personality, values, personal style) and substantive (i.e., disagreements related to tasks) supervisor-subordinate conflicts. In doing so, we addressed the link between employees' and supervisors' attitudes toward each other in explaining conflicts; hence, we filled a gap in the extant literature. As expected, AC, LMX, and SBSE significantly reduced relationship and substantive conflicts between supervisors and employees, whereas LoAlt was positively related to relationship conflicts. Moreover, moderation analyses revealed that commitment was more strongly related to conflicts in the case of low, rather than high, SBSE.

The quality of relationships between supervisors and employees, as measured through LMX, was negatively correlated with both types of dyadic conflicts. Yet, in regression analyses, the negative relationship between LMX and relationship conflicts became nonsignificant. Thus, even though LMX is known to be related to perceived similarities between the subordinate and supervisor (e.g., Turban & Jones, 1988) that should prevent incompatibilities (i.e., conflicts) from occurring (Jehn, 1995; Rahim, 2002), it appears that AC and SBSE are stronger and more proximal determinants of conflicts. In fact,



relationship and substantive conflicts were negatively associated with AC and SBSE, independently of the quality of the relationship itself (LMX). As AC is based on identification with and emotional attachment to the supervisor, it may (a) be incompatible with personal animosity, thereby minimizing relationship conflicts, and (b) favor the emergence of shared interests that reduce substantive conflicts. Last, the positive links between SBSE and relationship and substantive conflicts suggest that high SBSE employees are generally less inclined to experience conflicts with their supervisors. This finding is consistent with Korman's (1970) self-consistency theory, which predicts that individuals who have developed a positive self-evaluation tend to adopt positive behaviors and attitudes that confirm and reinforce their self-image.

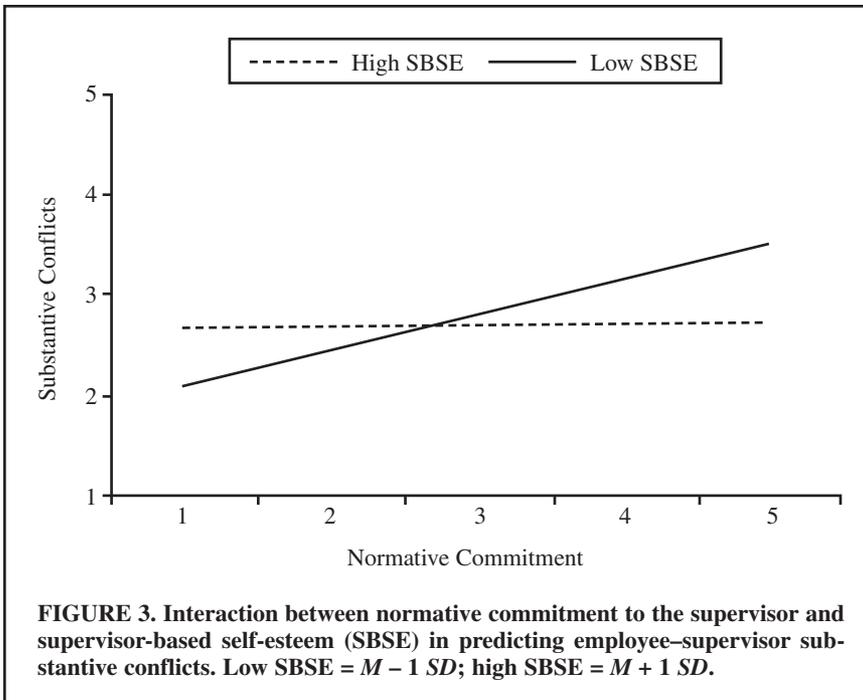
LoAlt was positively related to relationship—but not substantive—conflicts. This finding is in line with the argument that LoAlt is an undesirable form of commitment. In fact, besides increasing turnover intentions (e.g., Meyer et al., 2002; Stinglhamber et al., 2002), the feeling of being trapped in the relationship with one's supervisor might be associated, as we have shown, with an increase of an employee's involvement in relationship conflicts, which is the most detrimental type of conflict (Jehn, 1995; Rahim, 2002). That said, our study did not address the conflict management styles used by employees who are confronted with a relationship conflict with their supervisor. We speculate that employees with high



levels of LoAlt adopt an avoidance style (Rahim, 1983) because they are not in a position to lose their supervisor.

The main effects observed for commitment and SBSE are qualified by higher order interactions. Our results indicated that the relationship between AC and conflicts (relationship and substantive) was stronger (i.e., the slope of the regression line was steeper) for low, rather than high, SBSE individuals. Low SBSE individuals actually benefited more from AC than did their high SBSE counterparts in terms of reducing conflicts with supervisors. High levels of SBSE constrained the relationship between AC and both types of conflict such that the relationship was nonsignificant. These results are consistent with Brockner's (1988) behavioral plasticity theory, which predicts that low-self-esteem individuals are more reactive to environmental cues. That is, low SBSE employees are more sensitive to the affective tone of the relationship with their supervisor and experience more conflicts when AC is low.

Unexpectedly, we also found a significant interaction between SBSE and NC on substantive conflicts. As NC increased, low SBSE employees engaged in more substantive conflicts. According to commitment theory (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001), NC reflects a sense of obligation and loyalty. It is plausible that it also involves a sense of integrity, such that employees with high NC tend to express their ideas more explicitly to their supervisors, which may result in more substantive conflicts (i.e.,



disagreements related to tasks) among those who are sensitive to external cues (i.e., low SBSE condition). Meyer and Allen (1991) argued that NC develops as a result of the internalization of a set of norms concerning appropriate conduct. The notion of appropriate conduct may explain why NC and SBSE did not interact to predict relationship conflicts in that this type of conflict is less socially desirable in work organizations.

#### *Limitations and Perspectives*

This study has several limitations. First, our measure of LoAlt displayed poor reliability ( $\alpha = .57$ ). Thus, a refinement of the measure is in order. However, as reliability is the upper limit of validity, the analyses involving LoAlt were conservative. This lack of reliability may be partly explained by the fact that the distinction between HiSac and LoAlt with regard to commitment to the supervisor is new and needs additional work. In early studies on organizational commitment forms, LoAlt was also found to display a poor reliability (e.g.,  $\alpha = .59$  in Somers, 1993). In an attempt to solve the problem, we slightly revised the LoAlt scale items and tested a revised 4-dimensional measure of commitment to the supervisor on an independent sample of 231 employees working in a variety of organizations. The Appendix shows the confirmatory factor analysis

results for both the study sample and the new sample. It is interesting to note that the reliability of the new LoAlt scale was good ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Thus, we encourage researchers to further explore the validity of a 4-dimensional model of commitment to the supervisor.

Another potential concern is that we obtained our measures simultaneously from a single source, which could have inflated some of our results. However, common method variance actually reduces the power to detect moderating effects (Evans, 1985), suggesting that the interactions reported in the present study are unlikely the result of such a bias. Similarly, multicollinearity may have affected our results since independent variables were at least moderately related to one another. However, as the sign of relationships between independent variables and conflicts remained the same in correlation and regression analyses, no suppressor effect has occurred. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of this study prevents us from drawing conclusions in terms of causality. For example, conflicts may predict attitudes rather than the other way around (Jehn, 1995). Longitudinal studies are warranted to more clearly disentangle these effects. Also, because our results are based on the employees' viewpoints, it is uncertain whether supervisors would share the employees' conflict perceptions. Future researchers interested in supervisor-subordinate conflicts should survey both members and match the reports to form dyads. Last, we did not take into account personality determinants of conflicts, although research indicates that "individuals have stable tendencies in attributions they make about their conflict experiences across time, partners, and situations" (Bono, Boies, Judge, & Lauver, 2002, p. 311).

### *Conclusion*

The results of the present study extend previous research on commitment to the supervisor. We derived our 4-dimensional model of commitment to the supervisor from the conceptualization of the general model of commitment in the workplace (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001) and recent work that suggests splitting CC into two distinct subdimensions (e.g., Bentein et al., 2005; Jaros, 1997). Interestingly, three forms of commitment to the supervisor—AC, NC, and LoAlt—were involved in either main or interactive effects on dyadic conflicts. These results support a multidimensional view of commitment as applied to the supervisor. The observed results also open a fruitful avenue for research by widening the range of potential outcomes associated with commitment to the supervisor. Future researchers should look at conflict management styles (Rahim, 1983) as it relates to different forms of commitment to the supervisor. In addition, we introduced SBSE, a new construct referring to the self-evaluation of one's worth resulting from the relationship with one's supervisor. This new construct may help shed light on the dynamics of the supervisor-subordinate relationship and potentially improve the prediction of behaviors known to be related to the quality of the dyadic relationship, such as in-role performance (e.g., Gerstner & Day, 1997).

## AUTHOR NOTES

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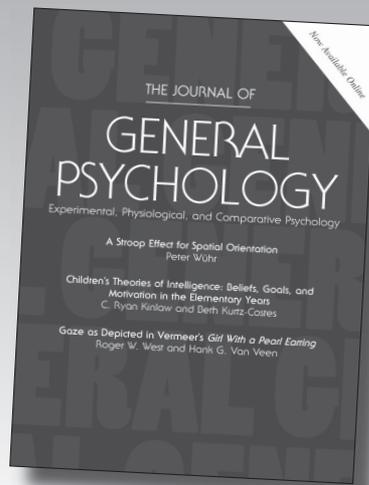
**APPENDIX**  
**Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Commitment to the Supervisor Items**

Item	Study sample	New sample
<b>AC</b>		
1. I respect my supervisor.	.87	.88
2. I personally appreciate my supervisor.	.86	.87
3. I have admiration for my supervisor.	.90	.84
4. I am proud to work with my supervisor.	.91	.94
5. My supervisor means a lot to me.	.86	.90
6. I really feel attached to my supervisor.	.78	.85
<b>NC</b>		
1. I would feel guilty if I left my supervisor now.	.80	.87
2. I feel I have a moral obligation to continue working with my supervisor.	.48	.83
3. I would not leave my supervisor at the moment because I feel obligated to him or her.	.83	.87
4. If I were offered the chance to work with another supervisor, I would not think it was morally right to leave my current supervisor.	.73	.81
<b>HiSac</b>		
1. For me personally, the costs of leaving my supervisor would be far greater than the benefits.	.57	.77
2. I would not leave my supervisor because of what I would stand to lose.	.91	.89
3. I keep working with my current supervisor because of the advantages that I get from it.	.56	.46
<b>LoAlt</b>		
1. I have no choice but to continue working with my current supervisor.	.36	
2. I keep working for my current supervisor because I can't see with whom else I could work.	.63	
3. I feel that I have too few options to consider leaving my current supervisor.	.59	
4. I have no other choice in this organization than to continue working with my current supervisor.		.86
5. I keep working for my current supervisor because I have no other choice in this organization.		.85
6. I do not have the opportunity to work for another supervisor in this organization.		.89

*Note.* For study sample,  $N = 240$ ; for new sample,  $N = 231$ . Entries are completely standardized CFA loadings. Study sample fit indices:  $\chi^2(98) = 306.19$ ,  $p = .01$ , NNFI = .95, CFI = .96, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .08; new sample fit indices:  $\chi^2(98) = 266.22$ ,  $p < .01$ , NNFI = .96, CFI = .97, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .08. Alpha coefficients for study sample: .94 for AC, .79 for NC, .73 for HiSac, and .57 for LoAlt. Alpha coefficients for new sample: .95 for AC, .91 for NC, .75 for HiSac, and .90 for LoAlt.

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