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# Job Authority and Interpersonal Conflict in the Workplace

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Using data from a 2005 sample of 1,785 working adults in the United States, the authors examine the association between job authority and the exposure to interpersonal conflict in the workplace and potential gender and age contingencies in that association. A positive association was observed between authority and conflict, but that association was more positive among men and younger workers. Moreover, the authors rule out occupation, job sector, role-set multiplicity, and work conditions as alternative explanations for these associations. These observations have implications for theoretical views about social status variations in job authority and its link to interpersonal stress in the workplace.

**Keywords:** *job authority; interpersonal conflict; gender; age; role-set*

Power and conflict are two classic themes in the sociology of work (Marx, 1844/1983; Simmel, 1955). Power relates to the ways that individuals possess “control over resources, people, and things” (Wolf & Fligstein, 1979). Analyses of social class and status attainment have underscored the centrality of *job authority* as one micro dimension of power (Dahrendorf, 1959; Smith, 2002; Wright & Perrone, 1977). Authority in the workplace is often viewed as legitimate relations of domination and subjection because it involves structured roles within formal organizations (Dahrendorf, 1959). Some scholars have characterized job authority as “a highly coveted workplace resource” (Smith, 2002, p. 511). Although there is little doubt that job

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authority is a desirable condition for many workers, high levels of authority have potential interpersonal *costs*. Researchers have already established the processes related to the conceptualization and operationalization of job authority (Lopreato, 1968; Robinson, 1984; Wright & Perrone, 1977), the social ascription and status attainment processes that influence levels of job authority (Elliott & Smith, 2004; Smith & Elliott, 2002; Wright, Baxter, & Birkelund, 1995), or its effects on income inequality (Reskin & Ross, 1992; Smith, 1997; Spaeth, 1985). By contrast, we pursue a different question: Are individuals with more job authority exposed to more interpersonal conflict in the workplace?

Interpersonal conflict at work involves perceptions about exposure to negative forms of interaction that range from minor disagreements to more severe altercations, including violations of and/or insults to the self; perceptions of injustice, inequity, or unfairness; goal impediments or thwarted aims; incompetence; and being the target of another person's verbal or physical antagonism or aggression (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Donovan, Drasgow, & Munson, 1998; Frone, 2000; McCann, Russo, & Benjamin, 1997; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Spector & Jex, 1998). Sociological analyses of the social-structural determinants of interpersonal conflict in the workplace are important for several reasons. First and foremost, although there is little doubt that the workplace is often a source of support and solidarity (Hodson, 2001; House, 1981; McGuire, 2007), the frequency of incivility, bullying, resistance, and need for negotiation also makes the workplace one of the most interpersonally frustrating role contexts (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Fitness, 2000; Glomb, 2002; Hodson, Roscigno, & Lopez, 2006). That is, interpersonal conflict is one of the most prevalent and consequential stressors in the workplace (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989; Hahn, 2000; Keenan & Newton, 1985; Narayanan, Menon, & Spector, 1999; Schwartz & Stone, 1993; Smith & Sulsky, 1995). Moreover, research across disciplines links interpersonal conflict with an array of personal and organizational outcomes, including elevated feelings of mistrust (Kramer, 1999), anger (Sloan, 2004), incivility (Cortina et al., 2001), theft (Chen & Spector, 1992), violence (Folger & Baron, 1996), sabotage (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), absenteeism (Geurts, Schaufeli, & Rutte, 1999), intentions to quit and job stability (Broschak, Davis-Blake, & Block, 2008; Côté & Morgan, 2002), physical symptoms (Pousette & Hanse, 2002), and reduced levels of organizational commitment, citizenship behaviors (Blader & Tyler, 2003), morale, and productivity (Weakliem & Frenkel, 2006).

Given the deleterious consequences of interpersonal conflict, we argue that it is important for researchers to discover the social-structural arrangements

that influence it and whether core social statuses operate as contingencies. Thus, we sought to extend the scope of prior research with the following aims: (a) to specify the association between job authority and interpersonal conflict at work; (b) to assess gender and age contingencies in that association; and (c) to rule out any potential influences of job sector, occupation, role-set multiplicity, and work conditions as alternative explanations. We address these aims with data from a 2005 national survey of working adults in the United States; this offers a unique opportunity to describe a portrait of social-status variations in exposure to interpersonal strife in the American workplace.

## Background

### Is Job Authority Associated With Interpersonal Conflict in the Workplace?

In many workplace organizations, some actors “call the shots,” others are “order takers,” and some do both; all these processes involve interpersonal dynamics (Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). Job authority delineates the parameters of power and status because it affords sanctioning, supervising, and decision-making control over others (Smith, 2002). Individuals with authority often hold the responsibility to hire and fire others and influence others’ pay (Elliott & Smith, 2004). Moreover, leaders in the workplace typically control an array of conditions that ultimately influence the quality of work life for others (Kelloway, Sivanathan, Francis, & Barling, 2005). The power to distribute rewards and punishments, and dictate the work of others, will likely incite some degree of relational discord. Those with job authority often confront resistance, noncompliance, and unsatisfactory performance (Hodson, 2001); moreover, they are usually in charge of managing it (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000). In their account of the health consequences of job authority, Mirowsky and Ross (2003) observed that the positive and negative elements of authority cancel each other out; the result is a null association between job authority and health. They argued that the central reason for the negative elements of authority involves its influence on *interpersonal conflict*:

Having authority means being responsible for the actions and accomplishments of others. A person who supervises or manages others must get them to cooperate and produce. That invariably creates frustration and conflict. No amount of authority changes the fact that individuals themselves decide what they do, and may lack the ability to accomplish things they willingly try.

Even so, a person who judges and decides what others should do bears responsibility for the success of their actions and efforts. In a hierarchy those responsibilities go in both directions, to persons higher up as well as to persons lower down. Decision-makers often feel apprehension about how things will turn out and tension about resolving the conflicting interests of others higher and lower in the organization. When things go poorly, guilt, shame, anger and resentment often mingle with disappointment and fear of consequences. (p. 123)

Taken together, these ideas contribute to our first hypothesis, which we refer to as the *authority-conflict* hypothesis: Job authority should be associated with more interpersonal conflict at work. Next, we turn our attention to several competing views about the ways that association may vary across two core social statuses: gender and age. Although some evidence shows that men and older workers tend to have higher levels of job authority than women and younger workers (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Smith, 2002), our central aim was to establish whether the effects of job authority on interpersonal conflict in the workplace differ by gender and age.

### **Do Gender and Age Modify the Job Authority–Interpersonal Conflict Association?**

We propose two competing hypotheses about the ways that gender and age may modify any observed association between job authority and interpersonal conflict at work. The *status incongruence* hypothesis, which underscores how perceptions shape interaction, predicts that the positive association between job authority and interpersonal conflict is stronger among women and younger workers. Alternatively, the *communal-competitive striving* hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of behavior in interactions, predicts a stronger positive association between job authority and interpersonal conflict among men, especially younger men. The following sections provide a brief description of the theoretical ideas that contribute to these views.

With its focus on status characteristics, expectation states theory provides insights into the reasons why some individuals have greater access to participation, influence, and favorable appraisals in groups than others (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). Gender and age are among the most influential status characteristics because of their effects on the development and maintenance of performance expectations and evaluations (Driskell & Mullen, 1990). That is, gender and age characteristics contribute to cultural

perceptions of personal and social attributes (i.e., leadership abilities) that are salient in contexts that involve power dynamics (Miech, Eaton, & Liang, 2003; Scott & Brown, 2006). The theory contends that gender and age emerge as key diffuse status characteristics, especially in the workplace, because individuals with advantaged diffuse characteristics are deemed to be more legitimately in the possession of greater authority in hierarchical settings (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). For them, the deployment of authority is also perceived as more valid and acceptable. This view implies that men and older adults should tend to be more advantaged with respect to participation, influence, and the legitimate possession of authority in the workplace.

Like expectation states theory, role congruity theory focuses on gender and leadership dynamics, identifying the incongruities that women encounter when they are in positions that require them to simultaneously deploy “leader” and “feminine”; this is referred to as the “double bind” (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Moore, Grunberg, & Greenberg, 2005). This tension emerges because leadership roles involve agentic or task-related attributes, while “the female role” is stereotypically associated with communal and cooperative traits that are deemed incompatible with leadership (Acker, 1991). Wajcman (1998) observed that senior women may encounter more difficulties if they “manage like men.” The leader-female incongruity is associated negatively with appraisals about women’s potential for leadership, evaluations of women’s actual leadership behavior, and their trustworthiness (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Jeanquart-Barone & Sekaran, 1994; Scott & Brown, 2006; Valentine, Godkin, & Turner, 2002). Thus, the role incongruity view suggests that women in positions of greater authority should be more likely to encounter interpersonal conflict at work because of women’s traditional status disadvantages and (unfavorable) gender stereotypes about leadership.

On the other hand, role congruity theory also underscores the view that women are more communal and cooperative: They tend to be more concerned about the quality of relations at work, whereas men place greater emphasis on pay and advancement (Bartol, 1976; England & McCreary, 1987). Some scholars argue that female leaders have sought to offset the double bind by adopting more democratic and team-oriented approaches (Eagly et al., 2003). Moreover, women tend to receive more interpersonal rewards and recognition for their work (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003), report more supportive coworkers and supervisors (Glass & Camarigg, 1992), tend to rate “getting along with fellow employees” as more important to them than men do (Loscocco, 1990), and are more likely than men to feel that

work provides opportunities for favorable social exchanges (Ross & Wright, 1998). It is unclear whether these favorable social relations sustain when women and men hold similarly powerful positions of authority at work.

Also within the role congruity theoretical framework, notions of competitive striving and the associated processes of hypermasculinity linked with power are suggestive of a more positive association between job authority and interpersonal conflict among men. Some scholars argue that men with power enjoy greater freedom to engage in more competitive and combative exchanges with others (O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986). Here, gender and age intersect in an important way: These processes appear to be especially salient in younger men's workplace relations. Research shows that young men engage in more competitive behavior in which they strive for faster ascendancy through salary and prestige ranks; in particular, younger men report higher levels of competitiveness than middle-aged and older men (Theodore & Lloidy, 2000). Intense striving for power and success may foster a more powerful form of competitiveness that increases the risk for interpersonal friction. Taken together, these ideas underscore the role of competitive striving among younger men that predicts higher levels of interpersonal conflict overall, as well as a more positive association between job authority and interpersonal conflict.

These ideas emphasize the importance of considering age, independently and in conjunction with gender. With respect to the main and moderating effects of age, expectation states and role congruity views blend to provide a rationale for hypothesizing that the association between job authority and interpersonal conflict may be stronger among younger workers; that is, being young and having power over others are incongruent. In many workplace cultures, age norms shape perceptions of an appropriate career trajectory and the acquisition of "authority credits." Therefore, younger workers with high levels of authority may violate age-related status and organizational norms (Perry, Kulik, & Zhou, 1999) and risk being perceived as too inexperienced for their higher status position (Tsui, Egan, & Xin, 1995). Moreover, there are connections to ideas about competitive striving such that younger workers are more likely to be "me oriented" at work, which may pit personal and organizational priorities against each other (Smola & Sutton, 2002). On the other hand, older workers in positions of power may exhibit a more communal orientation because they have held power longer and have established a record of productivity, commitment, and the rewards of such investments (Kalleberg & Loscocco, 1983; Loscocco & Kalleberg, 1988; Pogson, Cober, Doverspike, & Rogers, 2003; Xie & Johns, 1995). Evidence that older workers place a higher value

on good relationships with coworkers reflects these ideas (Mortimer & Lorence, 1979).

Collectively, we have sought to blend ideas from expectation states and role congruity theories to develop two competing hypotheses about gender and age contingencies in the authority-conflict association. The status incongruence hypothesis predicts that the positive association between job authority and interpersonal conflict is stronger among female and younger workers because “being young” and “being female” are statuses that are generally viewed as being incompatible with job authority. By contrast, “being male” and “being older” are traditionally deemed advantaged statuses, so older men’s possession and deployment of authority should be viewed by others as more legitimate, so they may encounter less interpersonal strife. Alternatively, however, the communal-competitive striving hypothesis predicts that the positive association between job authority and interpersonal conflict is stronger among men, especially younger men. For women, expectation states and role incongruities that underscore the negative implications of “being female” and “having power” are believed to encourage and further reinforce a more communal, cooperative orientation and, hence, a null or negative association between authority and conflict among women. By contrast, although expectation states and role congruity theories provide a basis for the prediction that advantaged diffuse status characteristics raise legitimacy in hierarchical conditions, the possibility of competitive striving processes may detract from men’s overall advantage by suggesting that younger men with greater job authority encounter the most interpersonal conflict at work.

### **Considering Alternative Explanations**

In establishing the effects of job authority on interpersonal conflict in the workplace, it is essential to consider alternative explanations associated with occupation, job sector, role-set multiplicity, and other work conditions. Although it was not our goal to test a comprehensive set of theoretical views for each of these, we wish to underscore broadly that these conditions may be related to job authority and interpersonal conflict in ways that contribute to their association. For example, workers with authority are likely to be involved in strategic decision making, to display assertive leadership behaviors, and to have greater responsibility for the vital operations that shape the course and success of an organization (Hambrick, Finkelstein, & Mooney, 2005; Spaeth, 1985; Wright et al., 1995). They are more likely to solve problems, make judgments, and control the work of others to achieve goals (Hodson, 2001). Not only are individuals in these higher status positions

likely to work longer hours (Maume & Bellas, 2001), but they are also likely to encounter greater role-set multiplicity, that is, more frequent direct contact with a wider array of superordinates, subordinates, coworkers, and customers or clients. Coser (1975) observed that "in a complex role-set, individuals are more likely to be confronted with incompatible expectations" (p. 246). Thus, working longer hours and having more frequent interactions in more complex role-set arrangements probably increase the risk for exposure to interpersonal conflict at work.

We also adjusted for job sector by comparing workers in different job sectors, including private for-profit, government, nonprofit, the self-employed, and workers in family businesses. To our knowledge, there is little prior theory or evidence about the systematic patterning of interpersonal conflict across sectors. Public organizations are known to be more affected by social norms of justice and fairness. For example, public institutions are often more open to public scrutiny for equality of women (Hultin & Szulkin, 2003), for following grievance procedures (Edelman, 1990), and for hiring more women into their management structures (Hultin, 1998). These ideas predict less conflict among those in public sector jobs. By contrast, preliminary analyses (described later) showed that government sector jobs have greater role-set multiplicity, which increases the extent of contact with others and the likelihood of conflict.

Although these ideas imply that compositional and structural stressors related to job authority may increase exposure to interpersonal conflict, it is also the case that job authority is often described as a "highly coveted workplace resource" because of its link to other favorable conditions such as autonomous, interesting, and enriching work (Reskin & Ross, 1992; Ross & Reskin, 1992; Schieman, Kurashina, & Van Gundy, 2006; Smith, 2002). These conditions, in turn, are often associated positively with psychosocial resources, such as mastery and supportive coworker relations (Hodson, 2004; Ross & Wright, 1998; Schieman, 2002). Likewise, the higher earnings of those with authority may function as resources that reduce exposure to interpersonal conflict. Other work conditions, especially job insecurity and job noxiousness, are likely to be associated positively with interpersonal conflict, but their links to job authority are less certain. Some researchers contend that job insecurity "produces a shortened 'shadow of the future' in which people feel less constrained to act civilly because of reduced expectations of having a relationship in the future" (Hodson et al., 2006, p. 386). Corporate restructuring and outsourcing may elevate feelings of job insecurity among workers that in turn can increase the risk for interpersonal problems at work (Hearn & Parkin, 2001). Therefore, although the

direction of influence is unclear, the balance of theory and evidence suggests that job insecurity creates uncertain, tense, and competitive climates that increase the likelihood of interpersonal discord.

## Method

### Sample

We analyze data from the Work, Stress, and Health survey, which involved telephone interviews with 1,800 adults in the 50 United States in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Eligible participants were 18 years of age or older in the paid labor force. Participants had to be sufficiently fluent in English to complete the interview. We were able to successfully interview 70.8% of all those deemed eligible. For the present analyses, we excluded participants who reported having no contact with others at their jobs, yielding a sample of 1,785. The overall sample characteristics are similar to those of working adults in other national data sets such as the 2005 American Community Survey. Using the American Community Survey data, we weighted analyses to achieve conformance with the population in terms of sex, age, race, marital status, and occupation.

### Measures

*Interpersonal conflict in the workplace.* Drawing on a comprehensive review of qualitative and quantitative studies (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001; Donovan et al., 1998; Frone, 2000; McCann et al., 1997; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Spector & Jex, 1998), we developed a new index to measure interpersonal conflict in the workplace. As we described above, this involves perceptions of exposure to negative forms of interaction that range from minor disagreements to more severe altercation, including violations of and/or insults to the self; perceptions of injustice, inequity, or unfairness; goal impediments or thwarted aims; incompetence; and being the target of another person's verbal or physical antagonism or aggression. To operationalize this construct, we asked participants to report the extent of exposure to a variety of interpersonal problems in the past 30 days with the following eight items: (a) "someone treated you unfairly," (b) "someone blamed or criticized you for something that wasn't your fault," (c) "someone did not do the work that needed to be done or did it in a sloppy or incompetent way," (d) "someone got annoyed or angry with you," (e) "someone gossiped or talked about you

behind your back,” (f) “someone teased or nagged you,” (g) “someone gave you unclear directions about work you needed to do,” and (h) “someone made too many demands on you.” Participants were also asked to rate the frequency of exposure to each of these indicators from all sources in the workplace, including supervisors, supervisees, customers or clients, coworkers, or anyone else in the workplace. Response choices were coded as follows: 0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, and 3 = *frequently*. We then summed these responses to create the index of exposure to interpersonal conflict in the workplace ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

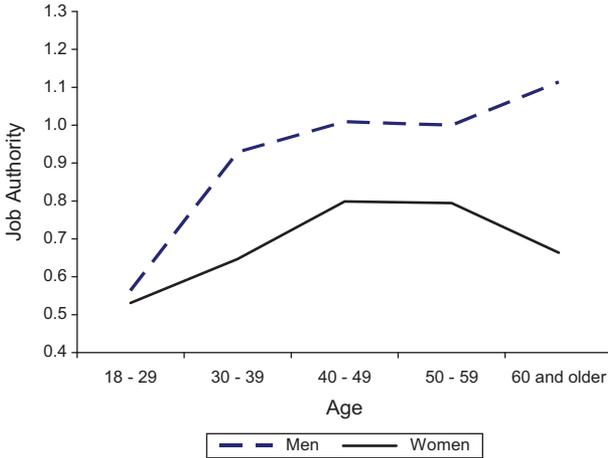
*Gender and age.* Gender was coded 0 for male and 1 for female. Age was measured in years.

*Job authority.* We used four items to assess job authority: (a) “Do you influence or set the rate of pay received by others?” (b) “Do you have the authority to hire or fire others?” (c) “Do you supervise or manage anyone as part of your job?” and, if a participant answered “yes” to the last question, (d) “Do any of those individuals supervise or manage others?” We coded “no” responses 0 and “yes” responses 1. To create the index, we summed these responses such that higher scores indicated more job authority. These items are similar to those in other studies (e.g., Elliott & Smith, 2004). To avoid problems of data sparseness, we combined scores of 3 and 4 into one category because of the small number of respondents who answered “yes” to all four items ( $n = 82$ ). Figure 1 illustrates the average levels of job authority across age and gender.

*Occupation.* To assess occupation, participants were asked about the job title of the “main job at which you worked last week.” This question refers to participants’ main places of employment, that is, the ones at which they spent the most time. Participants were also asked about some of their main duties to more accurately code responses. Using the open-ended information provided, responses were coded into five main categories in accordance with Bureau of Labor Statistics codes. In regression analyses, we contrasted the modal category “administrative” (technical, sales, and administrative support occupations) with “professional” (managerial and professional specialty occupations), “service” (service occupations), “craft” (precision production, craft, and repair occupations), and “labor” (operators or laborers).

*Job sector.* We assessed participants’ job sectors by contrasting the modal category “private for-profit company” with “government,” “nonprofit

**Figure 1**  
**Age Differences in Levels of Job Authority by Gender**



organization including tax-exempt or charitable organizations,” “self-employed,” and “working in family business.”

*Role-set multiplicity.* To assess role-set multiplicity, we used a set of measures that asked participants about the number of individuals in each of the following four groups: superordinates, coworkers, clients or customers, and subordinates. The number of superordinates was coded 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 or more. The number of coworkers was coded 0 = no coworkers, 1 = 1 to 9 coworkers, 2 = 10 to 19 coworkers, 3 = 20 to 29 coworkers, and 4 = 30 or more coworkers. The number of clients or customers was coded 0 = no clients or customers, 1 = 1 to 9 clients or customers, 2 = 10 to 19 clients or customers, 3 = 20 to 29 clients or customers, 4 = 30 to 39 clients or customers, and 5 = 40 or more clients or customers. The number of subordinates was coded 0 = no subordinates, 1 = 1 to 9 subordinates, 2 = 10 to 19 subordinates, 3 = 20 to 29 subordinates, and 4 = 30 or more subordinates. Each of these items was included in regression analyses as an indicator of the scope and depth (“multiplicity”) of the workplace role-set.

*Work hours.* We contrasted participants who worked fewer than 40 hours per week with workers in two other categories: those who worked 40 to 49 hours per week and those who worked more than 50 hours per week.

*Autonomous work.* One item asked, “How often does someone else decide how you do your work?” Responses were coded as follows: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, and 4 = *frequently*. We reverse-coded the responses so that higher scores indicated more autonomous work.

*Learning opportunities.* To measure learning opportunities, we asked, “How often do you have the chance to learn new things?” Responses were coded as follows: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, and 4 = *frequently*. Higher scores indicated more learning opportunities.

*Job noxiousness.* Three items asked participants “How often is your workplace noisy?”; “How often is your workplace dirty or dusty?”; and “How often is your workplace dangerous?” Responses were coded as follows: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, and 4 = *frequently*. We averaged the items; higher scores indicated a higher level of job noxiousness ( $\alpha = .63$ ).

*Job insecurity.* Respondents were asked, “In the next 2 years, how likely is it that you will lose your job or be laid off?” Responses were coded as follows: 0 = *not at all likely*, 1 = *somewhat likely*, and 2 = *very likely*.

*Personal income.* Income was assessed with the question “For the complete year of 2004, what was your total personal income, including income from all of your paid jobs, before taxes?” We logged income to reduce skewness in the distribution.

*Job tenure.* One item asked participants “How many years have you worked at your current job?” Response choices were coded in years.<sup>2</sup>

*Control measures.* Participants’ race was dummy-coded in three categories as non-Hispanic White (the omitted/contrast category), African American, and other. We compared married with previously or never married individuals. Education was coded as follows: 0 = *less than high school*, 1 = *high school graduate or GED* (General Educational Development diploma), 2 = *some college but no degree earned*, 3 = *associate’s degree (2-year)*, 4 = *college graduate (BA or BS)*, and 5 = *postgraduate—advanced degree (MA, PhD)*. Table 1 shows the summary statistics for all study variables.

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables**

Variable	Men ( <i>n</i> = 734)	Women ( <i>n</i> = 1,051)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 1,785)
Focal measures			
Interpersonal conflict	5.966	5.815	5.877
Job authority	0.922***	0.704	0.794
Age	43.423	43.505	43.471
Job sector			
For-profit sector	0.595**	0.533	0.559
Government sector	0.199	0.227	0.216
Nonprofit sector	0.068***	0.127	0.103
Self-employed sector	0.111	0.085	0.096
Family business sector	0.026	0.029	0.028
Occupation			
Professional	0.262**	0.320	0.296
Administrative	0.266***	0.415	0.354
Service	0.144**	0.205	0.180
Craft	0.147***	0.011	0.067
Labor	0.181***	0.049	0.103
Role-set multiplicity			
Number of superordinates	1.278**	1.416	1.359
Number of coworkers	1.146	1.114	1.141
Number of subordinates	0.685***	0.530	0.594
Number of clients or customers	1.484	1.506	1.497
Work conditions			
Autonomous work	2.591	2.527	2.553
Learning opportunities	3.274	3.191	3.225
Job tenure	10.000***	8.226	8.956
Works fewer than 40 hours per week	0.158***	0.346	0.269
Works 40 to 49 hours per week	0.455	0.464	0.461
Works 50 or more hours per week	0.387***	0.189	0.271
Job noxiousness	2.629***	2.390	2.488
Job insecurity	0.253	0.224	0.236
Personal income (logged)	3.651***	3.292	3.440
Basic control measures			
White	0.782**	0.716	0.743
African American	0.121**	0.170	0.150
Other race	0.109	0.139	0.127
Married	0.599***	0.518	0.551
Previously married	0.136***	0.242	0.198
Never married	0.264	0.241	0.250
Education	5.123	5.255	5.201

\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests for differences between men and women).

## Plan of Analysis

Using ordinary least squares regression techniques, models proceeded as follows. The base model regressed the focal dependent variable, interpersonal conflict, on job authority, gender, age, and the basic control measures. Model 2 tested for the gender-by-age contingent association between authority and conflict. This required the inclusion of interaction terms: Women  $\times$  Age, Authority  $\times$  Women, Authority  $\times$  Age, and Authority  $\times$  Women  $\times$  Age. Prior to creating these terms, we centered age and authority by subtracting each score from the respective mean; this reduced multicollinearity between the interaction coefficient and lower order terms and increased the efficiency of the lower order estimates (Mirowsky, 1999). Subsequent models depicted sector and occupation (Model 3), role-set multiplicity (Model 4), and work conditions (Model 5).

## Results

Model 1 in Table 2 shows that job authority was associated with higher levels of interpersonal conflict. Moreover, older workers reported significantly lower levels of conflict. Although it appeared initially that there were no gender differences, in Model 2 we observed that gender modified the association between job authority and interpersonal conflict. Three patterns emerged: (a) The negative and significant coefficient for Job Authority  $\times$  Women indicates that the effect of job authority on interpersonal conflict was significantly stronger among men; (b) the negative and significant coefficient for Job Authority  $\times$  Age indicates that the effect of authority on conflict was stronger among younger workers; and (c) the positive and significant job coefficient for Authority  $\times$  Women  $\times$  Age indicates that the positive association between authority and conflict was strongest among younger men, which lends support to the communal-competitive striving hypothesis. Likewise, this three-way interaction suggests partial support for the status incongruence hypothesis, because younger workers experienced higher levels of interpersonal conflict, though the relationship was strongest among men. We illustrate these patterns in Figure 2, which shows the predicted scores on interpersonal conflict index at the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles of age for men (Figure 2A) and women (Figure 2B).<sup>3</sup>

In Model 3 we observed that individuals who were self-employed or employed in family businesses reported lower levels of interpersonal conflict compared with those in the for-profit sector. We found no differences in levels of conflict across occupations. In Model 4 we observed a positive link

**Table 2**  
**Regression of Interpersonal Conflict on Job Authority, Gender, Age, Interactions, and Other**  
**Work-Related Conditions With Controls Shown at Bottom ( $N = 1,785$ )**

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Focal associations</b>					
Job authority	0.988*** (0.222)	1.390*** (0.307)	1.573*** (0.297)	0.956*** (0.272)	0.999*** (0.266)
Women	0.215 (0.373)	0.026 (0.360)	0.167 (0.397)	0.131 (0.380)	0.284 (0.381)
Age	-0.085*** (0.014)	-0.091*** (0.019)	-0.081*** (0.020)	-0.076*** (0.020)	-0.073*** (0.023)
Women × Age	—	0.013 (0.026)	0.012 (0.026)	0.014 (0.025)	0.015 (0.025)
Job Authority × Women	—	-0.892* (0.378)	-0.923* (0.388)	-0.853* (0.359)	-0.868* (0.354)
Job Authority × Age	—	-0.096*** (0.023)	-0.090*** (0.026)	-0.085*** (0.023)	-0.075** (0.025)
Job Authority × Women × Age	—	0.080** (0.029)	0.073* (0.031)	0.070* (0.028)	0.058* (0.029)
Job sector	—	—	—	—	—
Government <sup>a</sup>	—	—	-0.793 (0.471)	-1.345** (0.493)	-1.444** (0.466)
Nonprofit <sup>a</sup>	—	—	1.184 (0.661)	1.020 (0.659)	0.994 (0.597)
Self-employed <sup>a</sup>	—	—	-2.911*** (0.715)	-1.362 (0.729)	-0.899 (0.747)
Family business <sup>a</sup>	—	—	-2.219* (0.951)	-1.289 (0.989)	-1.737 (0.940)
Occupation	—	—	—	—	—
Professional <sup>b</sup>	—	—	0.190 (0.448)	0.239 (0.451)	0.119 (0.421)
Service <sup>b</sup>	—	—	-0.239 (0.559)	0.134 (0.559)	0.027 (0.540)
Craft <sup>b</sup>	—	—	0.741 (0.760)	0.826 (0.794)	-1.109 (0.764)
Labor <sup>b</sup>	—	—	0.001 (0.601)	0.412 (0.598)	-1.350* (0.647)
Role-set multiplicity	—	—	—	—	—
Number of superordinates	—	—	—	0.839*** (0.210)	0.511** (0.204)
Number of coworkers	—	—	—	0.641*** (0.146)	0.603*** (0.185)
Number of subordinates	—	—	—	0.959** (0.318)	0.752* (0.339)
Number of clients or customers	—	—	—	0.253* (0.110)	0.320** (0.109)

(continued)

**Table 2 (continued)**

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Work conditions</b>					
Autonomous work	—	—	—	—	-0.946*** (0.172)
Learning opportunities	—	—	—	—	-0.497** (0.200)
Job tenure	—	—	—	—	-0.001 (0.021)
Works 40 to 49 hours per week <sup>c</sup>	—	—	—	—	0.151 (0.448)
Works 50 or more hours per week <sup>c</sup>	—	—	—	—	0.944 (0.589)
Job noxiousness	—	—	—	—	1.561*** (0.219)
Job insecurity	—	—	—	—	1.013** (0.379)
Personal income	—	—	—	—	0.674** (0.245)
<b>Basic control measures</b>					
African American <sup>d</sup>	0.092 (0.836)	0.009 (0.727)	-0.021 (0.789)	0.236 (0.712)	0.504 (0.746)
Other race <sup>d</sup>	-1.280** (0.493)	-1.292** (0.494)	-1.461** (0.504)	-1.342** (0.512)	-0.993* (0.495)
Previously married <sup>e</sup>	2.093*** (0.518)	2.066*** (0.509)	1.950*** (0.498)	1.877*** (0.495)	1.763*** (0.465)
Never married <sup>e</sup>	0.706 (0.521)	0.709 (0.503)	0.823 (0.492)	0.737 (0.496)	1.023* (0.466)
Education	0.054 (0.097)	0.076 (0.094)	0.070 (0.117)	0.044 (0.116)	0.064 (0.111)
Constant	5.001	5.070	5.360	2.495	0.335
R <sup>2</sup>	.065	.096	.121	.164	.244

Note: Values are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are shown in parentheses.

a. Compared with for-profit job sector.

b. Compared to administrative occupations.

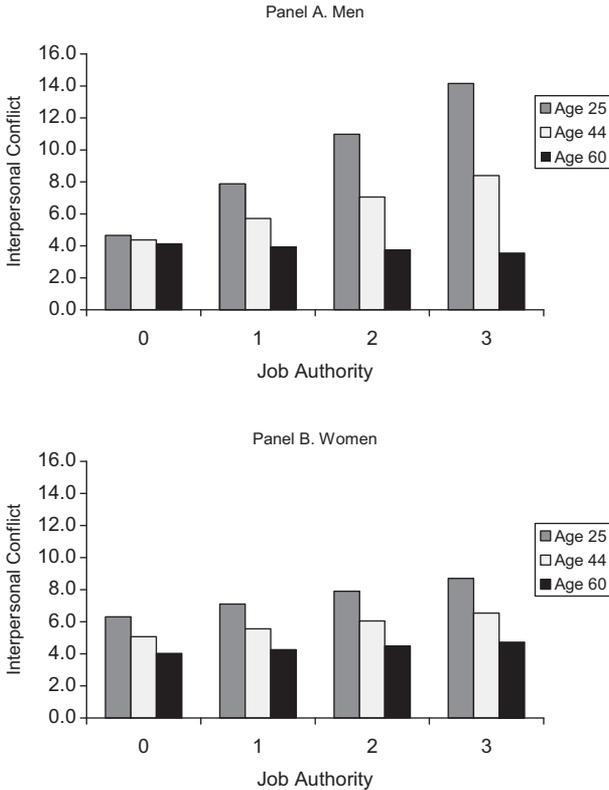
c. Compared with individuals who worked fewer than 40 hours per week.

d. Compared with Whites.

e. Compared with currently married.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

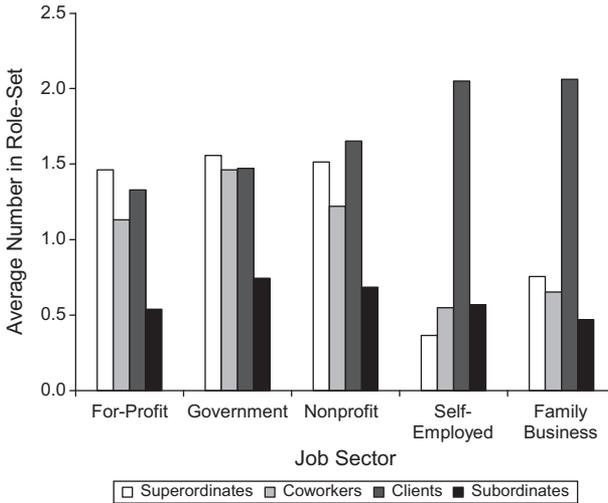
**Figure 2**  
**Job Authority and Interpersonal Conflict by Gender and Age**



between role-set multiplicity and exposure to conflict. That is, the numbers of superordinates, subordinates, customers or clients, and coworkers were each associated positively with conflict. Taken together, however, our statistical adjustments for occupation, job sector, and role-set multiplicity had modest influences on the focal associations shown in Models 1 and 2.

Model 4 revealed an unexpected but noteworthy finding: Once we included role-set multiplicity in the model, we observed that workers in the government sector reported a significantly lower level of interpersonal conflict

**Figure 3**  
**Role-Set Multiplicity Across Job Sectors**



compared with workers in the for-profit sector. Separate analyses (not shown) indicated that this suppression effect was attributable to the fact that workers in the government sector reported higher levels of role-set multiplicity (see Figure 3), especially in the subordinate and coworker role-sets, which in turn elevated their risk for exposure to interpersonal conflict. Were it not for their generally higher levels of role-set multiplicity, workers in the government sector would report lower levels of interpersonal conflict than their counterparts in the for-profit sector.

As shown in Model 5, individuals who had jobs characterized by autonomous work conditions and those with more learning opportunities reported lower levels of interpersonal conflict. By contrast, the following work conditions were associated with higher levels of exposure to interpersonal conflict: job noxiousness, job insecurity, and income. The inclusion of these work conditions reduced the Authority  $\times$  Women  $\times$  Age coefficient slightly, but it remained statistically significant. Additional analyses that entered each work condition separately (not shown) indicated that job noxiousness mostly accounted for that reduction, mainly because younger

men with authority were more likely than similarly situated women to experience this condition. Collectively, the observations in Table 2 indicate that the positive association between job authority and interpersonal conflict was stronger among men and younger workers, net of job sector, occupation, role-set multiplicity, and work conditions.

Finally, the comparison of Models 4 and 5 revealed another unexpected suppression effect. In Model 4 we observed no differences in interpersonal conflict across the occupation categories. However, once we adjusted for the fact that individuals in labor occupations were exposed to significantly higher levels of job noxiousness than those in administrative jobs, we found that labor occupations had a significantly lower frequency of exposure to workplace friction.

## Discussion

Our study offers four contributions about the link between job authority and interpersonal conflict at work: (a) Job authority is associated with greater exposure to interpersonal conflict; (b) the authority-conflict association is contingent on gender and age; (c) these gender and age contingencies remain significant net of potentially influential social-structural conditions, including job sector, occupation, and work conditions; and (d) several unexpected suppression effects emerge that involve job sector and role-set multiplicity, on one hand, and occupation and job noxiousness, on the other hand. By describing these patterns in a 2005 national survey of working adults in the United States, our study provides a comprehensive sociological portrait of exposure to interpersonal strife in the American workplace.

As others have observed, job authority is typically viewed as a “coveted resource” that most workers desire. We document, however, that it comes with interpersonal costs: Individuals with authority are more frequently exposed to interpersonal conflict, but this association also depends on the gender and age of the power holder. Specifically, the association between authority and conflict is strongest among men and younger workers. These observations speak first and foremost to the predictions of expectation states and role congruity theories, which suggest that gender and age are two of the most influential status characteristics because of their influence on others’ appraisals of performance. Workers with advantaged diffuse characteristics—being male and older—are generally viewed by others as more legitimately in possession of authority; for them, the execution of authority is more customary and compelling. Therefore, when individuals

of these statuses deploy authority, they should encounter less interpersonal friction. However, our findings also underscore the intersection of diffuse status characteristics in a manner that is not entirely consistent with expectation states and role congruity theories: We found that although older workers perceived less conflict than their younger counterparts, men do not uniformly enjoy the hypothesized benefits of advantaged status. Specifically, the positive authority-conflict association is strongest among younger men, partly because young men tend to have more noxious jobs, and this elevates exposure to interpersonal conflict. Although the expectation states and role congruity theories predict that being young and female are disadvantaged statuses, we did not observe corresponding evidence that job authority is more strongly related to interpersonal conflict for younger women. Moreover, the patterns present some challenges to the premises of the expectation states and role congruence theories. On one hand, the finding that younger power holders reported higher levels of interpersonal conflict at work is consistent with the predictions of both theories. On the other hand, the fact that male power holders reported higher levels is somewhat inconsistent with role incongruence and status expectation perspectives.

Why do young male power holders report the highest levels of conflict? Men with power often have greater freedom to engage in more combative or competitive exchanges with others, and more important, young men tend to enact more competitive forms of behavior in which they strive for faster ascendancy through salary and prestige ranks. It is plausible that younger power holders, more generally, are less likely to be perceived as legitimate because of their youth, which may be an indicator of inexperience to others with more seniority. However, it is equally reasonable to interpret this finding as a meter of a lack of experience managing others; that is, young power holders may tend to be less capable of resolving problems without evoking some degree of confrontation and antagonism. Additionally, more intensive striving for success among younger men, in particular, may generate a powerful (and more masculine) form of competitiveness that has greater potential to fuel interpersonal friction at work (Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Unfortunately, we do not have a measure of "competitive striving," so these speculations should be explicitly tested in future research.

Our observations also provide potential insights for the conceptualization of gendered organizations (Britton, 2000). Whereas Acker (1991) argued that masculinity is rewarded in organizations (i.e., individuals who behave in traditionally masculine ways make it to the top rungs of organizations), when gender combines with age, we find a reverse effect, whereby young male power holders report more interpersonal conflict. This is not to suggest

that organizations are not gendered per se (i.e., there is a disproportionate amount of men in positions of authority) but rather that perhaps the benefits of masculinity, at least in a relational context, are contingent on age. Generally speaking, older men may tend to display their authority in ways that are deemed more legitimate by others. Part of this process involves greater tenure, a correlate of age, which in turn signifies greater competence associated with the experience of managing others. Thus, the relationship between perceptions and behaviors seems to be contingent on experience, whereby expectations attached to gender are also conditioned by norms and expectations associated with age, timing, and life stage.

Our observations about age deserve a bit more scrutiny. The overall net negative association between age and interpersonal conflict and the significantly weaker association between job authority and interpersonal conflict among older workers are important findings in light of the fact that average levels of job authority increase with age. However, it appears that the interpersonal strife associated with job authority does not rise in accordance with its acquisition across the age span. As expectation states and role congruity theories suggest, age norms may play a key role as they relate to collective representations of the age-graded nature of career trajectories and the slow, steady accumulation of authority credits. The role incongruent status of being young and possessing job authority underscores risks associated with violating age-related status and organizational norms. Such workers may be deemed by others as too inexperienced or immature for their higher status position. As a result, these younger power holders may perceive that they encounter unpleasant incivilities more often than their more seasoned counterparts.

Another possibility, which has less to do with gendered assumptions, suggests that young men may be more status or reputation conscious than women (Wajcman, 1998); therefore, they may be more likely to perceive themselves as the target of others' discontent. These ideas further accentuate issues of gender, power, and affective processes in the workplace. Younger men's management styles may contain more combative forms of affect, including variants of anger. Gender-linked emotional stereotypes imply that women experience emotions more frequently and have a lower capacity for emotional control compared with men (Fabes & Martin, 1991; Shields, 1986, 2000). In contrast, men are more likely to "lace up" their feelings in a process that Jansz (2000) called "restrictive emotionality." However, anger may be the exception (Shields, 1987). Lay and clinical views label anger an "acceptable male emotion," which suggests that men are more comfortable with anger (Kring, 2000). Cultural ideas about anger as a masculine emotion

legitimate it as assertive or powerful, whereas traditionally feminine images or nurturing roles tend to discourage anger among women (Cupach & Canary, 1995). Targets of anger at work may feel intimidation, but being the target of anger is also a trigger of anger (Canary, Spitzberg, & Semic, 1998). We convey these speculative ideas to encourage future research about the potential utility of anger in the workplace and its link to authority and conflict, especially with respect to variations by gender and age.

Although we were surprised that work conditions did not contribute much to the observed gender and age contingencies, several patterns are noteworthy. For example, workers with higher earnings find themselves more frequently exposed to interpersonal conflict. This is noteworthy because it reinforces and extends an emerging theoretical perspective about the stressors associated with higher status work conditions (Schieman et al., 2006). That is, the bulk of theory and research that links dimensions of social stratification to well-being argues that individuals in the most disadvantaged positions tend to have the poorest health (often because of greater exposure and/or vulnerability to social stressors; McLeod & Nonnemaker, 1999). Although there is little doubt that authority and higher earnings are desired and advantaged workplace conditions, we also believe more research is needed to understand the interpersonal stressors that are associated with these higher status conditions, especially because these patterns go against the grain in ways that potentially suppress health advantages of higher status work. An integration of sociology of work and stress perspectives can refine sociological theories about these processes.

Finally, several suppression effects require interpretation. One set involves unexpected observations in the interrelationships among job sector, role-set multiplicity, and conflict. Specifically, once we adjust for the greater role-set multiplicity among jobs in the government sector, the difference between work in government and for-profit sectors in levels of interpersonal conflict increases. Therefore, greater numbers of coworkers and subordinates that workers in government jobs encounter conceals what would otherwise be their less frequent exposure to interpersonal strife. One possible interpretation is that bureaucratic structures in the government sector tend to be more rigid and, in turn, may yield less competitive climates than jobs in the for-profit sector. Role-set multiplicity increases the likelihood of difficult social encounters, so once we account for the structural-organizational differences between sectors, the sociocultural influences become apparent.

The second set of noteworthy suppression effects involves occupation, job noxiousness, and interpersonal conflict. Specifically, workers in labor

occupations are exposed to significantly higher levels of job noxiousness than those in administrative occupations. Individuals in noxious work conditions—jobs that are dirty, noisy, and dangerous—are also more frequently exposed to interpersonal conflict. These off-setting patterns imply that workers in labor occupations would experience less frequent conflict were it not for their higher levels of noxious work conditions. These observations are also consistent with the “stress of higher status” perspective. It is important, though, that these patterns reveal more interpersonal conflict among higher status occupations only after we account for the more noxious work conditions among those in lower status occupations.

## Conclusion

There is little doubt that job authority is a highly sought after and socio-economically advantageous position to hold in society. In addition to the high-status benefits of job authority, it often harvests resources in the workplace that enhance personal, social, and organizational outcomes. Although job authority legitimizes relations of domination and subjection in organizations, this greater power may also come with a price. The interpersonal costs of high levels of authority are real, although we observe that this burden is not shared equally across social statuses and social-structural arrangements. Thus, although many workers report that positive social relationships represent some of the most highly satisfying and enriching features of their work, the frequency of exposure to negative relations make the workplace one of the most interpersonally frustrating role contexts. Although sociologists have focused more attention on the problems faced by women in power, our observations underscore the importance of assessing the interpersonal costs for male power holders, especially across the age span.

Although in this article we take the view of superordinates, the next logical step is to unpack interpersonal relationships at work by assessing the role of relational demography, which involves comparing demographic characteristics of individuals involved in interactions within dyads or groups at work (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). Although we have shown that authority comes with costs, particularly for young male power holders, future research should examine the role of subordinates in these relations and how gender and age intersect to influence workplace interactions. For instance, Kanter (1977) found that men may instigate tensions and engage in “boundary heightening” between female superordinates and subordinates to exaggerate differences and competitive relations. There is also evidence of an “intragender

competition effect” or “queen bee syndrome” whereby women struggle to forge supportive superordinate-subordinate relationships at work (Cooper, 1997; Staines & Tavis, 1974; Wharton & Baron, 1991). These are all important but understudied relational dynamics in the workplace that may have salient consequences for the quality of interpersonal relationships among workers. Moreover, relationships with supervisors have been linked to important individual outcomes, including physical and mental health (Helge, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001; Kasl, 1998; Pfeffer, 1983; Wheaton, 2001). One new direction for research involves the assessment of the health consequences of same-gender versus gender-mixed superordinate-subordinate contexts. Such research would help illuminate the relevance of relational demography for individual-level outcomes.

Future analyses should seek to advance the conceptualization and operationalization of interpersonal conflict. For example, it would be valuable to unpack interpersonal conflict by distinguishing between intensity and frequency to mitigate between the effects of chronic but less serious conflicts compared with less frequent but highly intense conflicts. Constant but minor instances that engender feelings that a supervisor is incompetent and disrespectful can have significant and costly implications for worker morale (Broschak et al., 2008; Crompton & Harris, 1998; Hodson, 2002; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), intentions to quit (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998), and productivity (Weakliem & Frenkel, 2006). Moreover, although our measure incorporates a range of elements that constitute interpersonal conflict, future inquiry would benefit by fleshing out diverse components such as “sloppiness” and “unfairness.” It is conceivable that different elements engender varying degrees of seriousness and intensity and, by extension, may lead to different outcomes.

Finally, although our level of analysis treats authority and conflict as individual-level properties, it is likely that authority relations operate differently across levels of organizations. Our observation of suppression effects in the experience of conflict among workers in government versus for-profit sectors sheds some light on this issue. That is, were it not for their higher level of role-set multiplicity (an element of organizational structure), workers in the government sector would experience less interpersonal conflict than their counterparts in the for-profit sector. Analyses of the role of organizational structure in control and conflict processes underscore the importance of management actions. Organizational logics can engender ambiguity, conflict, and contradictions that may obscure inequalities between different categories of workers (Vallas, 2003). For example, temporary workers may feel more threatened than full-time workers if they expressed

dissent against managerial practices (Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000; Smith, 2001). These issues provide fruitful avenues for understanding the ways that conflict operates at different levels (i.e., individual vs. organizational) and subsequent implications for authority and interpersonal relations in the workplace.

## Notes

1. To obtain the sample, we used a list-assisted random-digit dialing (RDD) selection drawn proportionally from all 50 states from GENESYS Sampling Systems. The sampling approach used the List + 1 method, which tends to yield a higher proportion of productive numbers (Lepkowski, 1988). List-assisted RDD is widely accepted now by most social survey research organizations as a cost-effective alternative to the pure RDD methods originally developed by Waksberg (1978). List-assisted RDD increases the probability of dialing residential numbers while minimizing the biases often associated with nontraditional RDD techniques. The final sample was based on (a) telephone numbers for residential households, (b) households agreeing to answer screening questions, (c) successfully screened households with one or more employed adults, and (d) eligible households with subsampled adults who agreed to participate.

2. Although we did not have measures of duration in the current position of job authority, we suspect that job tenure and age overlap with it. Moreover, age is a focal contingency net of job tenure. In separate analyses (not shown), we included an indicator of recent promotions, but it was unrelated to the dependent measures and had no influence on the age-contingent effects.

3. Recent studies have documented gender-by-race influences in authority-related processes (Smith, 1997, 2002). Thus, we tested if the effect of job authority on interpersonal conflict depended on both gender and race (i.e., Gender  $\times$  Race  $\times$  Job Authority interactions). However, we did not find evidence that the association between job authority and conflict was contingent on both gender and race; this may have been due to small numbers of non-White participants (analyses available on request).

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