Exploring willingness to participate in and expectations about mediation when experiencing negative asymmetrical conflicts in the workplace

Bachelor Thesis

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June 30th, 2022

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Abstract

This research examined whether people experiencing asymmetrical power conflicts will have lower outcome expectation and are therefore less willing to participate in mediation compared to people in symmetrical power conflicts.

Participants were requested to read a scenario and imagine being an employee in a company who experienced a conflict. The conflict was about a task that had been done wrong by the employee and another employee of the company. To manipulate power symmetry versus power asymmetry, participants were randomly assigned to either the asymmetry condition or the symmetry condition. Each condition had to read the exact same story, except the asymmetry condition read about a conflict with a manager and the symmetry condition read about a conflict with a co-worker. Then they had to answer questions about willingness to participate in mediation and about outcome expectations targeting positive outcome expectations, relationship outcome expectations and five different negative outcome expectations about mediation.

Results showed that unexpectedly, the experimental manipulation did not affect participants' willingness to participate in mediation, nor where there differences in outcome expectations. The only exception was wanting to quit the job. People imagining asymmetrical conflicts in the workplace were more likely to quit their job after mediation than when imagining symmetrical conflicts. Moreover, there was a correlation between quitting the job and being dependent on the other party. People imagining asymmetrical conflicts felt more dependent on the other party than people imagining symmetrical conflicts, which could explain why imagining asymmetrical conflicts led to being more likely to quit the job. However, future research is needed to investigate more factors like whether being dependent on the other party is related, for example, to feeling forced to take part in mediation.

The average person, nowadays, spends one third of their life at work which would be around 90,000 hours in one lifetime (One third of your life is spent at work, n.d.). Therefore, it can be said that a job is likely to have a great impact on people's life, as well as on their quality of life. In order to have a safe physical and social workplace, it is important to have organisational support regarding the physical, social, personal and developmental needs of workers (McKenzie, 2015). A safe workplace would be a place where employees feel secure and experience a positive co-working environment in which people treat each other with respect (Autrey, 2021). However, studies show that 78% of employees have been experiencing conflict in the workplace once and 22% face conflicts frequently (Abdul et al., 2021; Kazemi et al., 2022). Another study in Sweden found that every second woman and every third man have been experiencing conflicts in the working environment in the past 12 months, which shows that conflict in the workplace is an important issue (Hyde et al., 2006).

It is also suggested that the available data underestimates the prevalence of workplace conflicts and the impact of it, since many people do not report it to the human resources management or file a compensation claim (McKenzie, 2015). An important reason for not reporting a conflict might be that a considerable degree of conflicts are with supervisors and/or managers, which could lead to feeling afraid to speak up and report the issue (Saundry et al., 2013). Meaning, employees could fear to be treated unfairly when reporting a conflict with a manager. Additionally, according to Bollen and Euwema (2013a), managers are more likely to express emotions, attitudes or private opinions in conflicts which might intimidate the lower-power individual. Therefore, research shows that conflicts most likely occur when people experience power differences (Abdul et al., 2021).

In order to try to solve (a)symmetrical conflicts in the workplace, a support party is often used to balance the power differences and to make the individuals, especially the lower-powered individuals, more comfortable and help them to gain control over the conflict

resolution process (van Dijk et al., 2016). A frequently used kind of support party is often a mediator who, in general, helps the conflict parties to communicate with each other and guide them through the mediation process (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a; Brubaker et al., 2014; McKenzie, 2015). However, extensive research on the process, feelings towards and outcomes of conflict mediation in power asymmetric conflicts in the workplace is scarce. This is why the research question 'How does power (a)symmetry predict willingness to participate in mediation and outcome expectations about mediation regarding conflict mediation in the workplace?' was established.

But what exactly is conflict in the workplace? Generally, conflict is described when there is a dissonance between goals, interests, opinions or values of different individuals and this dissonance then could lead to frustration on both parts – or on one (Adu et al., 2015). Additionally, in general there are two types of conflict that are applicable to the workplace, namely task conflict and relationship conflict (Ayoko et al., 2003; Huan & Yazdanifard, 2012). Task conflict means that there is a discord between colleagues about ways to accomplish a task in a workplace. An example for these could be that a manager expects or wants something to be done in a particular manner, but the employee understands it incorrectly and accomplishes the task differently (Ayoko et al., 2003). However, these conflicts can have a positive effect on colleagues since they are able to ask questions, and it can encourage innovative and creative thinking. Mostly, in task conflicts there is no problem with the person itself but really only on how the task is handled (Ayoko et al., 2003; Huan & Yazdanifard, 2012).

Relationship conflict, on the other hand, means a personal discord between two people or a group of people. Examples of relationship conflict could be co-workers making negative remarks about others, undermining each other or interrupting others in their speech (Ayoko et al., 2003). In general, these types of conflicts might be due to personal

disagreements or frustrations. These can lead to resentment, irritation and suspicion which affects group outcomes regarding tasks that need to be done (Ayoko et al., 2003). However, in a relationship conflict, it is not really about the task that is gone wrong but about the person itself.

Effects of workplace conflicts

When workplace conflicts persevere, it is possible for it to turn into bullying. Bullying refers to situations where people feel uncomfortable or subjected from others over an extended period (Ayoko et al., 2003). Moreover, a conflict escalation often leads to bullying which in turn leads to repeated negative behaviours towards the victim (Jenkins, 2011). A study revealed that at least 1 in every 10 employees of businesses like hospitals or industrial companies, have experienced or reported being bullied in the workplace and over a quarter of the people who have witnessed the bullying or were bullied themselves, left their jobs (Ayoko et al., 2003; Hyde et al., 2006). Furthermore, 42% of the people who were bullied were being ignored, 36% were being intimidated, 30% were heavily monitored during their work, 19% were afraid to take a sick leave and 16% have experienced verbal threats (Ayoko et al., 2003).

Not only bullying in the workplace has a substantial impact on a person, also conflicts in the workplace in general can have an influence on physical and psychological well-being. It affects job satisfaction, productivity and stress levels (Bollen & Euwema, 2013b; Hyde et al., 2006; Kazemi et al., 2022; McKenzie, 2015). Studies have shown that people tend to take more sick days or are more absent when facing conflicts in the workplace (Hyde et al., 2006; Saundry et al., 2013). Negative feelings like shame, anger, stress, fear, guilt, remorse or betrayal are frequently experienced by parties involved in a workplace conflict (Kidder, 2011). Additionally, researchers also found that workplace conflict can lead to burnouts,

change of jobs and lowered professional commitment on the part of the victims (Kazemi et al., 2022).

Reasons for workplace conflicts

Given the many negative effects workplace conflicts have, a question about the reason behind it might come up. There can be several reasons why workplace conflicts arise, of which some were already mentioned. For example, sometimes conflict appears when a certain job is not done correctly or when someone misinterprets the other person's words (Huan & Yazdanifard, 2012; Adu, 2015). Moreover, people might have different expectations regarding how a job has to be done, especially in high-pressure working environments such as at hospitals (Huan & Yazdanifard, 2012). In other businesses there might be conflicts about budgets, staffing and strategies, as well as personality conflicts or personal recognition (Brubaker et al., 2014). However, there are differences in the type of conflict and the associated effects of it. It is more likely to have conflicts about money or strategies with a manager than with a co-worker (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). In turn, it is more likely for co-workers to have disagreements about what was said, for example, when there has been a miscommunication or misinterpretation (Saundry et al., 2013).

When there is a dispute with a manager, it can be said that there is a hierarchical relationship that differs in positional power (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). Managers, for example, have control over valued resources such as information, expertise, employability, or money, which in turn means they have more power resources (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a; Jenkins, 2011). Subordinates often do not have as many resources and are thus dependent on their supervisors or managers. Therefore, they sometimes are in need to get rewards like valued resources and are obliged to avoid punishments (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a).

Higher-power individuals are also often nonchalant or insensitive about emotions expressed by lower-power individuals (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). In addition, higher-power individuals are more likely to express their emotions, private opinions, and attitudes than lower-power individuals which increases independent thinking which in turn could lead to an inhibited perspective-taking (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). This also shows why there is often a conflict in asymmetry hierarchies (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). A study in 2012 reported that 70% of the parties who mentioned conflicts in the workplace said that this was due to power asymmetry (Saundry et al., 2013). Moreover, other studies have found out that managers who use different power resources in order to attain compliance from lower-power individuals and to change behaviours or attitudes, were more likely to end up in a conflict with these individuals (Abdul Aziz et al., 2021). This type of conflict can then be seen as relationship conflict. According to Coccia (2019) lower-power individuals might feel resistance and controlled by the managers who try to change them in this way, which is why these kinds of asymmetry lead to conflict. Additionally, the study showed that power is correlated with conflict and that conflict worsens when higher-power individuals apply more power on their subordinates (Coccia, 2019).

Subordinates on the other hand pay great attention to details, are responsive to their environment and pick up messages like indirect comments or attempts of persuasion quicker than managers (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). This indirectly implicates and shows that conflicts are often experienced more personal by lower-power individuals than higher-power individuals (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). In addition, research shows that managers or supervisors are more likely to confront their subordinates and use their power, while on the other hand, the subordinates withdraw when being confronted (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). This, which was mentioned earlier, is due to the lack of power resources on the side of the lower-power individuals (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). Consequently, it is difficult to deal with

conflicts in the workplace, especially when a lower-power individual experiences power asymmetry.

Mediation in workplace conflicts

Because sometimes conflicts cannot be solved on their own, certain measures must be undertaken to create a safe space in a business again. Especially lower-powered individuals want to restore their feeling of loss of control, because they often experience this as a threat to their identity (van Dijk et al., 2016). A support party often may then help to make disadvantaged conflict parties feel like they gain more control over the conflict resolution process (van Dijk et al., 2016). One kind of support party in the workplace, and the most frequently used method, is mediation (McKenzie, 2015). Mediation basically means a process in which a mediator tries to start open communication between the conflicted parties and help them reflect on their behaviour, mutual understanding and reality testing (Bollen & Euwema, 2013b; Brubaker et al., 2014; McKenzie, 2015). Additionally, during mediation issues are discussed in order to make each party understand each other's side and concerns (Bollen & Euwema, 2013b). Thus, the participants play the main role in decision-making and the mediator makes sure that every party is heard and understood (McKenzie, 2015). What is most important, is that mediation is supposed to reset relationships and helps clarify expectations. Studies found out that employees often just want resolution instead of punishment (McKenzie, 2015). However, the focus of mediation does not lie on determining agreements or settling the conflict (Bollen & Euwema, 2013b; Brubaker et al.,2014). Instead, mediation is often administered and participated in to help people feel better, because they are heard and taken seriously (McKenzie, 2015). However, it is time consuming and extremely challenging for every party (McKenzie, 2015; Saundry et al., 2013).

Mediation is especially challenging for parties who experience power differences, because higher-power individuals tend to speak up more while lower-power individuals have more difficulties of expressing themselves freely and are more likely to silence up by looks or remarks of the higher-power individual (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). In turn, it is challenging for the mediator to create a balance between the two parties (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a; van Dijk et al., 2016).

Workplace mediation has been used more frequently nowadays and researchers have found many positive effects of it (McKenzie, 2015). According to Kidder (2007), mediation is very effective in organisations, especially for managers of a team since conflicts can hinder performance. Furthermore, mediation becomes increasingly popular to resolve discrimination or harassment complaints, as well as relational or emotional aspects (McKenzie, 2015). Research also suggests that workplace mediation has better organisational results than no intervention (McKenzie, 2015). Moreover, even in difficult and emotional conflicts where there is a lot of negative emotion, mediation is found to be successful since it directly attends the relationship issues (Jenkins, 2011). When the mediation was done early enough there were higher chances of a sustainable settlement (Saundry et al., 2013). Saundry et al. (2013) also reported that most respondents were happy with the mediation, thought that they benefitted from it and would participate in it again. However, it was important that the parties did not meet with each other or were left alone in a room together prior to the mediation (Saundry et al., 2013).

Additionally, in a study by Anderson and Bingham (1997) was found that 52% of the employees had a positive attitude towards mediation, while only 3% of the employees had a negative attitude towards mediation. In contrast, 69% of the supervisors had a positive attitude toward mediation, while 0% had a negative attitude towards it (Anderson & Bingham, 1997). In most cases, the conflicted parties ended in an agreement with each other

(Saundry et al., 2013). However, lower-powered individuals perceive the mediation process often more negative than higher-powered individuals (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). This is due to possible negative perceptions or evaluations of mediation in general and due to anxiety of speaking freely when facing a higher-powered individual face-to-face (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a).

In regard to workplace mediation, the mediator has to be aware of possible power asymmetries. The mediator ensures that every party knows their rights and has the possibility to hold individual sessions to assist in balancing the power differences (Jenkins, 2011). Thus, in power asymmetry disputes, the mediator tries to reach a power balance to satisfy both parties and to make the lower-power individual more comfortable during the mediation process (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a).

Nevertheless, studies that have conducted research in the area of mediation in the workplace showed that mediation dealing with asymmetry power conflicts show positive outcomes (Anderson & Bingham, 1997; Saundry et al., 2013). Since the mediator is supposed to create a power balance, a fair process can lead to a more satisfied outcome (McKenzie, 2015). In regard to willingness to participate in mediation, the answers in the study of Saundry et al. (2013) were mixed. Some people were open to take part in mediation and some, in particular managers, were more sceptical because they felt like they were forced to participate.

Moreover, research shows that there is danger for lower-powered employees to experience unfair treatment or a shift of responsibility when participating or not participating in mediation (Saundry et al., 2013). They also tend to have a higher fear of losing their job and often feel highly uncertain of the mediation process (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). Some lower-power individuals are also afraid to speak their mind or express their thoughts and

wishes when supervisors are present during mediation (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). This is why mediation might be difficult for these individuals.

From a manager's perspective, it sometimes may be possible that they feel mediation as a threat to their authority or a symbol of failure. Managers also often feel compelled to participate in mediation, even if they are not required to do so (Saundry et al., 2013). Additionally, higher-powered people are often less empathetic in regard to external factors, which might lead them to behave as they like in work settings (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a). They also tend to ignore that there might be a problem, which could lead to an annoyance by the lower-powered individual (Ufkes et al.,2012). However, as Bollen and Euwema (2013a) mentioned, at the end of mediation higher-powered individuals often feel better and more satisfied than lower-powered people, which goes in line with the study of Anderson and Bingham (1997) which was mentioned earlier. The reason for this was that it was difficult for the mediator to create a power balance which is why the lower-power individual was not as satisfied with mediation than the higher-power individual (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a).

The studies that have been conducted in the past regarding asymmetry power conflicts in the workplace, show that mediation can be a fruitful way to handle and possibly solve conflicts. It is still very challenging and there are different expectations and feelings on the part of the lower and higher power people regarding it (Saundry et al., 2015). It is, for example, not known whether symmetry or asymmetry differences in conflicts lead to differences in willingness to participate in mediation. Even though lower-power individuals often feel more uncertain to participate in mediation due to being afraid of losing the job or the expectation of getting treated differently after, the responses regarding willingness to participate in mediation are mixed (Bollen & Euwema, 2013a; Saundry et al., 2015).

Moreover, it is not quite clear whether people experiencing asymmetrical power conflicts lead to lower outcome expectations about mediation compared to people

experiencing symmetrical power conflicts. The literature just shows general expectations and outcomes, most of the studies do not compare symmetry with asymmetry power conflicts. However, it might be very important to get to know the differences, since the literature does show that there are many asymmetry power conflicts and the connected effects of it. When getting to know the missing information, mediation can be customized to asymmetry power conflicts and symmetry power conflicts, which might lead to a better outcome in the future. By customizing to asymmetry conflicts is meant that the mediator might have a single session with the lower-powered individual to let them express their feelings and opinions freely and then assist them a bit more in a joint session (Ufkes et al., 2012). This is because research has shown that lower-powered individuals often do not feel heard and feel disrespected by the higher-power individual (Ufkes et al., 2012). Another example of customizing the asymmetry power conflicts is to pay attention to the relationship and inhibitions on the part of both parties, but especially on the part of the lower-powered individual. It is probably best to be even more aware of the power differences and this study is to show these and help people understand these differences. Moreover, if there would be more clarity about the expectations of mediation on part of the lower-power individuals, customizing mediation in regard to that could be easier. Therefore, two hypotheses were constructed:

H1: Participants who experience a negative asymmetrical power position in a labour conflict will be less inclined to participate in mediation to resolve that conflict than when experiencing a symmetrical conflict.

H2: This proposed effect is explained by outcome expectations: participants in a negative asymmetrical power position will have lower outcome expectations (more negative expectations regarding conflict resolution and feeling less satisfied with the mediation process), compared to participants in a symmetrical power position.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through snowball and convenience sampling, as well through the Sona Point System of the University of Twente. In total 105 people participated in the research. In order to participate in the study, all participants were required to have sufficient English skills. In the Sona Point System, it was a written requirement stating to speak and understand sufficient English. As for the snowball and convenience sampling, every participant was asked whether they speak sufficient English to complete this survey. 23 respondents had to be removed, since they did not answer the most important questions which were supposed to answer the hypotheses. The most important questions were the those answering the hypotheses, namely willingness to participate in mediation and outcome expectations about mediation. This left 82 respondents in total. Of the 82 participants 67.1% were female (n = 55) and 32.9% male (n = 27). The mean age of the sample was 27.52 and ranged from 17 to 89 (*SD* = 14.32). Furthermore, the majority of participants lived in Germany with 73.2% (n = 60), 23.2% (n = 19) lived in the Netherlands and 3.7% (n = 3) lived in other countries like Poland (n = 1) and Lithuania (n = 2). Regarding the education, most indicated that they finished High School as their highest education with 76.8% (n = 63), 13.4% (n = 11) finished their Bachelor's degree, 2.4% (n = 2) finished their Master's degree, 1.2% (n = 1) finished their PhD and 6.1% selected 'other'. The people selecting 'other' as highest level of education said that they finished their Abitur, MBO or state exam which is an equivalent of High School. As current employment status the majority of participants indicated being a student with 59.8% (n = 49), 22% (n = 18) were employed full-time, 8.5% (n = 7) were employed part-time, 1.2% (n = 1) were unemployed and 8.5% (n = 7) selected something else like being a student and working simultaneously, being a trainee or being retired. Moreover, 45% (n = 37) stated to be in a relationship, 40.2% (n = 33) stated to be

single, 12.2% (n = 10) stated to be married and 2.4% (n = 2) selected 'it's complicated' and 'engaged'.

Research design

This study adopted a between-groups design with one independent variable 'power asymmetry' with two conditions, namely 'asymmetry' and 'symmetry'. The respondents were randomly assigned to either the group having a conflict with a manager (asymmetry condition) - or the group having a conflict with a co-worker (symmetry condition). This left 37 participants in the asymmetry condition and 45 in the symmetry condition. *Willingness to participate* and *outcome expectations*, were the two dependent variables that were assessed. *Outcome expectations* were measured with the variables; *positive outcome expectations, relationship outcome expectations, quitting the job after mediation, feeling anxious about going to work after mediation, feeling bad about the conflict situation after mediation*

Independent and dependent variables

The experimental manipulation of power (a)symmetry

In order to manipulate the independent variable, the same conflict situation was used for the asymmetry condition and the symmetry condition. However, the difference was that the asymmetry condition had a text of a conflict with a manager and the symmetry condition a text of a conflict with a co-worker. The storyline was kept the same. The conflict story in the asymmetry condition was about an employee who had done a task with his manager in a car registration firm (see Appendix A). A day later, the manager sits at the desk of the employee and angrily tells them that they made a big mistake by registering false addresses to the cars and three cars were confused with each other. This was problematic because the firm who wanted their cars registered, paid a lot of money to the car registration firm. The manager blames everything on the employee even though they both did the task together. The manager

also tells the employee that he wished he had done the task with someone else. Nevertheless, the employee apologized to the manager and to the firm. Later that day, the manager brought cake and coffee for everyone in the lunchroom except for the employee who had made the mistake earlier. He made a comment like 'Oh my bad, I guess I forgot one person' which made the employee feel angry and intimidated. Weeks after the fact, the employee got ignored by the manager. The manager also refused to work with him again.

In contrast, the conflict story in the symmetry condition was the same, except the label 'manager' was replaced with 'co-worker' (see Appendix B). These conditions used to manipulate power (a)symmetry underwent a manipulation check with questions derived from van Dijk et al. (2016) and van Dijk et al. (2021). The manipulation check was used to get to know whether people in the asymmetry condition actually experienced power asymmetry and whether people in the symmetry condition actually experienced power symmetry in their given situations. The questions focused on aspects such as dependency and control. The questions were 'To what extent were you dependent on the other party?', 'To what extent was the other party dependent on you?', 'To what extent do you feel the other party controls the outcome of the conflict?' and 'To what extent do you feel you control the outcome of the conflict?' (van Dijk et al., 2016; van Dijk et al., 2021). These questions were measured with a 5-point likert scale, which ranged from 1 (labelled 'not at all') to 5 (labelled 'a great deal').

A mixed ANOVA test revealed that there was a significant difference between the questions 'to what extent are you dependent on the other party in this firm?' ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.10$) and 'to what extent is the other party dependent on you in this firm?' ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.11$), ($F(1,80) = 17.72$, $p < .001$). Meaning, people thought that they were more dependent on the other party than the party on them. Moreover, there was a significant dependence by condition interaction effect, $F(1,80) = 14.76$, $p < .001$. This means that people in the asymmetry condition felt like they were more dependent on the other party ($M = 3.62$, $SD = $

0.15) than the other party was dependent on them ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.16$). On the other hand, people in the symmetry condition did not feel like they were more dependent on the other party ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.13$) than the other party was dependent on them ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.15$). Meaning, the asymmetry condition felt a difference between the two dependency questions whereas the symmetry condition did not.

As for the questions 'to what extent do you feel the other party controls the outcome of the conflict?' ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.11$) and 'to what extent do you feel you control the outcome of the conflict?' ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.11$), a mixed ANOVA test showed a significant difference between the two questions, $F(1,80) = 67.23$, $p < .001$. Meaning, participants felt like the other party controlled the outcome of the conflict more than they thought they controlled the outcome of the conflict. However, no significant interaction effect between controllable outcome and condition was found, $F(1,80) = 1.87$, $p = .176$.

It was also measured whether the participants felt like there was a conflict. In this case, the questions focused on the aspect 'perception of the problem'. Two questions were derived from van Dijk et al. (2016) as well. However, van Dijk et al. (2016) do not use the word 'conflict' but 'problem' because otherwise it might lead to participants thinking there was an escalation. The two questions were: 'To what extend do you think there is a problem?' and 'To what extent does the other party think there is a problem?'. These questions were measured with the 5-point likert scale as well, which ranged from 1 (labelled 'not at all') to 5 (labelled 'a great deal').

A mixed ANOVA test revealed no significant difference between the questions 'to what extent do you consider there is a problem between you and the other party?' ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.11$) and 'to what extent does the other party consider there is a problem between him and you?' ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.12$), ($F(1,80) = 0.92$, $p = .339$). However, there was a significant perceived problem by condition interaction effect, $F(1,80) = 8.21$, $p = .005$. This means that

people in the asymmetry condition considered that there was a problem between them and the other party ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.17$) more than they thought the other party perceived there to be a problem ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.18$). On the other hand, the symmetry condition felt like the other party perceived there to be a problem ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.16$) more than the participants themselves felt like there was a problem between them ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.15$). Thus, the manipulation check succeeded partly because two out of three interaction effects were found.

Willingness to participate in mediation and outcome expectations after mediation

The online tool Qualtrics was used to construct the questionnaire, which was needed to measure the outcome expectations and willingness to participate in conflict mediation in the workplace when experiencing (a)symmetry conflicts. The dependent variables, *willingness to participate* and *outcome expectations*, were measured with a total of 16 items. 4 items were used to measure *willingness to participate,* and 12 items were used to measure *outcome expectations*. The items on *willingness to participate* and *outcome expectations* were constructed by asking oneself what these variables might look like in items. Examples of items of *willingness to participate* were: 'I think I would be open to explore the possibility of having mediation with the other party for this conflict' or 'I think I would feel ready to participate in mediation with the other party for this conflict'. Examples of items of *outcome expectations* were: 'After mediation I think I would feel less angry about the other party' or 'After mediation I think I would feel satisfied with the end result'. The questions were measured with a 7-point likert scale, ranging from 1 (labelled 'strongly disagree') to 7 (labelled 'strongly agree').

A factor analysis using varimax rotation showed that *willingness to participate* had one underlying factor with an explained variance of 55.22%. The item 'I think I would feel pressured to participate in mediation' had to be recoded because it was negatively formulated,

and the other questions were not. After recoding, the reliability of the scale was sufficient (α = .68).

On the other hand, a factor analysis for *outcome expectations* showed that there were three underlying factors. Factor 1 explained 37.63% of the variance, factor 2 explained 13.36% of the variance and factor 3 explained 8.67% of the variance. Items such as 'After mediation I would feel more comfortable going to work' or 'After mediation I would be able to let the conflict behind me' loaded high on factor 1 (.840; .693). In total there were six items that loaded high on this factor and all of them seemed to measure positive outcome expectations, which is why factor 1 was named *positive outcome expectations*. A reliability analysis showed a high reliability on *positive outcome expectations* (α = .85).

The second factor contained items such as 'After mediation I think the other party would still treat me differently', 'After mediation I think that the relationship between the other party and myself will be good again for a long period of time' and 'After mediation I think that the other party and myself will be unlikely to have a conflict again in the future' (-.696; .684; .719). However, the item 'After mediation I think the other party would still treat me differently' had to be recoded because it was negatively formulated while the other two items were positively formulated. Since the three items loading high on factor 2 all measured the relationship between the two parties, the factor was named *relationship outcome expectations* and had a modest reliability (α = .62).

Items such as 'After mediation I would quit my job', 'After mediation I would feel bad about the conflict situation' and 'After mediation I would feel anxious about going to work' loaded on factor three (.603; .517; .852). However, the reliability for these three items was relatively low (α = .55), a correlation analysis was done. The correlation analysis showed that there was a medium correlation between the items 'After mediation I would feel bad about

the conflict situation' and 'After mediation I would feel anxious about going to work' (r = .364, p = .001). Moreover, the correlation analysis also showed a medium correlation between the items 'After mediation I would quit my job' and 'After mediation I would feel anxious about going to work' (r = .390, p = <.001). There was no correlation found between the items 'After mediation I would quit my job' and 'After mediation I would feel bad about the conflict situation' (r = .116, p = .301). Since none of the three items correlate highly, it was decided that they will be kept separate in the analysis.

Procedure

All participants that were recruited via the University first had to login into the Sona Point System of the University of Twente. After registering for the study, the participants were given a link to the questionnaire, for which they used either their phone or their laptop with a stable internet connection. The other participants that were recruited through snowball and convenience sampling were provided with a link to the study. There was no compensation for participation after completing the study. At the beginning of the survey, they were informed that it was completely anonymous and could withdraw at any time during the study without any explanation. There was also information about the duration of the questionnaire, which was approximately 15 minutes. Before the actual questionnaire started, each participant also had to confirm the informed consent in order to proceed with it. The research started with a few demographic questions about age, sex, nationality, education, employment status and relationship status. After that, the survey went on with one of the two stories, dependent on which group the participant randomly got assigned to. After reading the story about the conflict, candidates had to fill out some questions about whether they actually perceived (a)symmetry differences. Then, questions measuring the dependent variables were asked to be filled out. Each question had seven answer options from which the respondents could choose from.

Results

Descriptives

Table 1 shows a summary of the complete data. The table shows that the scale of *willingness to participate* was in the upper area of wanting to participate in mediation because this variable was measured using a 7-point likert scale ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 0.99$). *Positive outcome expectations* were also in the upper area of the 7-point likert scale, because the mean is almost 5 ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 0.92$). On the other hand, the *relationship outcome expectations* were relatively lower with a mean of 3.70 ($SD = 1.01$). Other outcome expectations like *quitting the job, feeling bad about the conflict* and *feeling anxious when going to work* were also on the lower area of the scale ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.09$; $M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.45$; $M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.52$).

Additionally, Table 1 shows the correlations between the complete data. The correlation analysis was conducted to see whether and how variables were related to each other. Being dependent on the other party in the firm showed a medium correlation with quitting the job after mediation ($r = .31$, $p < .01$). Indicating that being dependent on another person in the firm goes in line with quitting the job. Moreover, previously it was said that people in asymmetrical conflicts were more likely to feel dependent on the other party in the firm. Thus, it can be said that people experiencing asymmetrical conflicts and feel dependent on the other person in the firm are more likely to quit the job. The type of condition people were in was moderately and negatively correlated with quitting the job after mediation ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$). This also indicates that people in the asymmetry condition would quit their job more likely which goes in line with the hypothesis that people experiencing asymmetrical conflicts in the workplace would be more likely to have more negative outcome expectations after mediation.

Moreover, *willingness to participate* was moderately and negatively correlated with *quitting the job after mediation*, as well as with *feeling anxious about going to work after mediation* ($r = -.45$, $p < .01$; $r = -.49$, $p < .01$). This showed that people who were less willing to participate in mediation had more negative outcome expectations regarding the conflict when they had to imagine how they would feel after mediation. Subsequently, the more willing to participate in mediation, the less negative outcome expectations were felt. *Positive outcome expectations* and *relationship expectations* can be seen to be strongly correlated with each other ($r = .53$, $p < .01$).

On the other hand, *positive outcome expectations* were moderately and negatively correlated with *feeling bad about the conflict situation after mediation* ($r = -.31$, $p < .01$). Meaning, that people who had more positive outcome expectations would feel less bad about the conflict situation after mediation. Furthermore, *positive outcome expectations* were moderately correlated with *willingness to participate* ($r = .38$, $p < .01$). This means that people willing to participate in mediation were more likely to have higher positive outcome expectations after mediation. Overall, table 1 shows that there were significant correlations between *willingness to participate* and outcome expectations ($p < .01$), except for *feeling bad about the conflict situation after mediation*. As for the condition, which can be seen in table 1, it means either being in the asymmetrical condition, which was labelled as 1 or in the symmetrical condition, which was labelled as 2. It can be seen that *you see problem* ($r = -.24$, $p < .05$), *being dependent on the other party* ($r = -.57$, $p < .01$), as well as *quitting the job* ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$) are negatively correlated with condition. This means that participants in the asymmetrical condition perceived a bigger problem, felt like they were more dependent on the other party, as well as they were more likely to want to quit the job.

Table 1.

Descriptives and Pearson correlation of predictors for willingness to participate in mediation and for outcome expectations after mediation

	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 condition	82	1.55	0.50	1												
2 dependent on party	82	2.95	1.08	-.57**	1											
3 party dependent on you	82	2.49	1.00	-.15	.36**	1										
4 you see problem	82	3.85	1.06	-.24*	.18	-.13	1									
5 party sees problem	82	4.01	1.09	.10	-.17	-.27*	.38**	1								
6 party controls outcome	82	3.74	1.02	-.21	.19	.09	.45**	.24*	1							
7 you control outcome	82	2.35	0.97	.03	-.07	.29**	-.07	-.04	-.23*	1						
8 willingness to participate	82	5.20	0.99	.06	-.09	-.19	.07	.17	-.12	-.18	1					
9 positive outcome expectations	82	4.97	0.92	.12	-.18	.03	-.06	.03	-.09	.03	.38**	1				
10 relationship outcome expectations	82	3.70	1.01	.03	-.10	-.13	-.18	-.15	-.26*	-.19	.23*	.53**	1			
11 feeling anxious outcome expectations	82	2.93	1.52	-.11	.24	.20	-.08	-.32	-.03	.02	-.49	-.32	-.15	1		
12 quit job outcome expectations	82	2.21	1.09	-.30**	.31**	.20	.05	-.05	.07	.07	-.45**	-.21	-.05	.39**	1	
13 feeling bad outcome expectations	82	3.37	1.45	.09	.10	.06	-.13	-.26*	-.01	-.12	-.21	-.31**	-.04	.36**	.12	1

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).
**. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Testing the hypotheses

In order to see whether there were differences in the asymmetry condition and symmetry condition for *willingness to participate*, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The test revealed no significant difference between the asymmetry condition ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 0.84$) and symmetry condition ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.10$) for willingness to participate ($t(80) = -0.57$, $p = .572$).Therefore, the first hypothesis that people in asymmetry power conflicts will be less willing to participate in mediation than people in symmetry power conflicts can be rejected.

The same test was used to compare *positive outcome expectations* in the asymmetry condition ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.90$) and symmetry condition ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 0.93$). However, no significant difference was found ($t(80) = -1.07$, $p = .29$). Additionally, there was no significant difference for *relationship outcome expectations* between the asymmetry condition ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.92$) and symmetry condition ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.08$); $t(80) = -0.23$, $p = .821$.

As for *quitting the job after mediation*, the independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between the asymmetry condition ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.12$) and the symmetry condition ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.97$); $t(80) = 2.80$, $p = .007$. This means that people experiencing asymmetrical conflicts in the workplace would be more likely to quit their job after mediation than when experiencing symmetrical conflicts in the workplace. This goes in line with the second hypothesis that people in asymmetrical power conflicts have lower outcome expectations about mediation. However, when comparing *feeling anxious about going to work after mediation* in the asymmetry condition ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.47$) and symmetry condition ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.57$), no significant difference was found ($t(80) = 0.98$, $p = .328$). Lastly, the independent samples t-test was used to compare *feeling bad about the conflict situation after mediation* in the asymmetry condition ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.34$) and

symmetry condition ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.55$). For this test as well, no significant difference was found; $t(80) = -0.86$, $p = .394$. Thus, the second hypothesis that people who experience asymmetrical power conflicts will have lower outcome expectations of mediation than people in symmetrical power conflicts can be partly rejected.

Discussion

The motivation of this study was to answer the research question whether differences in power could predict willingness to participate in mediation, as well as whether it could predict outcome expectations about conflict mediation in the workplace. In line with that, the study was used to answer the corresponding hypotheses that people imagining asymmetrical conflicts would be less willing to participate in mediation and have more negative outcome expectations about mediation than people imagining symmetrical conflicts.

Surprisingly, participants who had to imagine an asymmetrical conflict did not have lower expectations about and were not willing to participate less in mediation than were the participants who had to imagine a symmetrical conflict. The only difference was that people imagining asymmetrical conflicts were more likely to quit the job after mediation. This means that hypothesis 1 can be rejected and hypothesis 2 can be partly rejected. Q*uitting the job after mediation* was part of *outcome expectations*, which is why hypothesis 2 is only partly rejected. It seems like people imagining asymmetrical conflicts would be more likely to quit the job than people imagining symmetrical conflicts, indicating people in asymmetrical conflicts do have more negative outcome expectations about mediation.

The findings also showed that people imagining asymmetrical conflicts felt like they are more dependent on the other party than the other party on them whereas this was not found for people imagining symmetrical conflicts. Moreover, people imagining asymmetrical conflicts felt that there was a problem between them, and the other party more than they thought the other party perceived there to be a problem. For people imagining symmetrical

conflicts it was the opposite. This could be an indicator as to why people imagining asymmetrical conflicts were more likely to quit their job than people imagining symmetrical conflicts; people felt more dependent on a manager as well as they perceived there to be a bigger problem with the manager than with a co-worker. Thus, the conflict with a higher-power individual might have had a bigger impact on the participant. In line with this, researchers stated that workplace conflicts can lead to a change of jobs, which confirms what was seen in this study (Ayoko et al., 2003; Hyde et al., 2006; Kazemi et al., 2022). The more there is a perceived problem, the more likely someone is to quit their job.

Moreover, this finding could also explain why there were no differences found in the other variables. If people who experience asymmetrical power conflicts are in general more likely to quit their job, it could show that willingness to participate in mediation and outcome expectations of mediation do not matter since they want to quit their job anyways. Tillman et al. (2017) confirms that people in lower powered conflicts tend to think about quitting their job more often which in turn shows that mediation then could have no effect on them. Moreover, as was mentioned earlier, participants sometimes feel like they are forced to participate in mediation which is why this feeling could have influenced the answers to willingness to participate in mediation (Saundry et al., 2013). It could have been the case that people imagining asymmetrical conflicts felt more forced to participate in mediation than people imagining symmetrical conflicts. This then could have led these participants to indicate that they were more willing to participate in mediation than they actually were.

Previous research therefore raises the question why there were no differences in *willingness to participate* in mediation and *outcome expectations* of mediation when imagining an asymmetrical conflict or a symmetrical conflict. A reason could be that people in general think that conflict mediation is something positive, which is why there was no difference of willingness to participate between people imagining asymmetrical conflicts and

people imagining symmetrical conflicts. As mentioned before, according to Anderson and Bingham (1997), 52% of the employees in their study had a positive attitude towards mediation. In this study, higher powered, as well as lower powered individuals were asked about their attitude. Therefore, it could have been the case that *willingness to participate* never was dependent on (a)symmetry conflicts. However, the same cannot be said about outcome expectations. It could be that people would be open to participate in mediation but they could still have different outcome expectations depending on what kind of conflict it is and with whom they experience it with

A study by Shestowsky (2004) found that people in asymmetrical conflicts would be less willing to participate in mediation because they did not have the confidence to defend themselves in the process. This would also indicate that confidence levels could influence *willingness to participate* in mediation and possibly *outcome expectations* about mediation. Subsequently, as for willingness to participate, people with low confidence levels might still say they want to participate due to not being able to say no because of possible anxiety or feeling compelled to participate (Saundry et al., 2013). Because of the randomization of this study, people with low confidence levels should have been evenly distributed. However, it could also be the case that confidence levels could be a moderator and if this research would have included this, perhaps there would have been a difference between the asymmetry and symmetry condition. Therefore, for future research it could be interesting to find out whether people with a lower confidence levels would also have lower outcome expectations of mediation when experiencing asymmetrical power conflicts.

Furthermore, it could be a possibility that it was hard to imagine a workplace conflict. Especially, since mostly students participated in the study and possibly never experienced what an (a)symmetrical workplace conflict might feel like. The study could have included questions about whether participants have had experienced a conflict in the workplace before

and then look whether there would be a difference between participants who have had experienced it and participants who have had not. Evidence, for example, for this suggestion might be that Jehn et al. (2010) did find a difference of mediation satisfaction in asymmetrical and symmetrical conflicts because they used actual people who experienced (a)symmetrical workplace conflicts and were in the middle of a mediation process. Additionally, it was clear from the beginning that mostly students would participate in the study since it was published on the Sona System of the University of Twente. Maybe if the participants could have identified more with the conflict, because the conflict that was used was in a very specific firm, the findings could have been different.

Weaknesses and strenghts

Additionally, in this research there might have been a social-desirability bias. Social-desirability bias basically means that research subjects have the tendency to give socially desirable response instead of their real attitudes, opinions, or feelings (Grimm, 2010). Participants in this research might have answered according to what they thought the researcher would want, namely being willing to participate and having positive outcome expectations about mediation. This thought might have been due to that the survey stated that mediation is more frequently and successfully used.

The type of conflict could also have affected the results in this research. The conflict in this study was about an honest mistake by an employee. However, there are other types of causes of conflict in the workplace that are common as well. Common causes of workplace conflicts are lack of communication, clash of personalities and competitiveness (Deep et al., 2016). Maybe by choosing a common conflict like a miscommunication, the story would have looked more real, and people could have imagined the conflict better.

On the other hand, strengths of the study were that the sample was sufficient, and the data was easily analysed and interpreted. With easily analysed, it is meant that the hypothesis was answered with a simple analysis which can be easily replicated in the future. Moreover, the study provided more insights into possible causes and reasons for the outcome of it. It was also a starting point in regard to outcome expectations for further research. Previously, not a lot of research was done which specifically targeted *willingness to participate* in mediation and *outcome expectations* of mediation when experiencing (a)symmetrical workplace conflicts. Other research did suggest that mediation in conflict situations would show good outcome expectations, but it never focussed on the differences in asymmetry.

Future research

Additionally, for the future, further research with a different story and more people in the working population who might have experienced asymmetrical conflicts before, could show promising results. When using people out of a working population who experienced asymmetrical conflicts before, they might be more able to imagine an (a)symmetrical conflict. The results could then be clearer because it is closer to reality due to having experiences in the working environment and the conflicts that can come with it. Furthermore, other variables, like the degree of self-esteem or confidence levels, that might influence willingness to participate in mediation and outcome expectations of mediation could be included and investigated. Even though this study contained limitations, it can be used to learn from mistakes, and it could cause researchers to investigate further in this area of research. This research showed that people do feel like a conflict with a higher-power individual is worse than when having a conflict with someone on the same level of power. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate whether people in asymmetrical conflicts are willing to participate in mediation and have positive outcome expectations due to the social-desirability bias or due to feeling forced to participate in mediation.

All in all, even though this study did not confirm what was expected, it showed that being dependent on someone in the workplace could lead to being more likely to quit the job. People imagining asymmetrical conflicts felt more dependent on the other party than people imagining symmetrical conflicts. The dependency on another party in turn was related to being more likely to quit the job. It would be interesting to know whether this dependency on the other party is related to possibly feeling forced to take part in mediation, which was mentioned earlier, and subsequently wanting to quit the job. Since feeling forced could have influenced people's true feelings about wanting to take part in mediation, future research could then focus on to what extent people might feel forced to participate in mediation when experiencing (a)symmetrical conflicts. This could be done by asking questions about whether someone feels forced to take part in mediation and if so, why.

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Appendix A

Conflict story with the manager

It's a Thursday morning and you are on your way to your work, RBB car registrations. You're happy to get to work, because you need to do an important task together with your manager. You need to register 25 vehicles to an important firm. At work, you talk to the manager about the task, how it has to be done and who has to do what. The manager is your direct supervisor who determines and evaluates the work you do; he can also determine your job contract terms. You feel excited to work together with your manager on this difficult task. At the end of the day you're done with everything and you go home. On Friday morning, your manager sits at your desk with an angry face. You automatically feel you've done something wrong and ask if everything is okay. Your manager tells you that you have made a huge mistake, by registering false addresses to the cars. On top of that you have confused three cars with each other. This is all very problematic, because this important firm pays a lot of money to RBB car registrations. You two get into an argument, because at the end of the day you two did the task together. However, your manager does not take any responsibility and tells you it's all your fault. He also tells you that he wishes he had done this with someone more competent. You feel really bad about it and offer your apology to the manager, as well as to the firm you did the car registrations for, even though you still feel it was a mistake of the both of you. Later that day, the manager enters the lunchroom where all employees eat their lunch. He brings everyone a coffee and cake because his wife had made cake at home. Everyone grabs their piece of cake and coffee and when you get to the table, there is nothing left for you. You look at your manager and he tells you, 'Oh my bad, I guess I forgot one person.'. You feel angry and intimidated, as well as confused and ashamed. You leave the lunchroom. Weeks after the incident, your manager still only barely talks to you and refuses to work with you again.

Appendix B

Conflict story with the co-worker

It's a Thursday morning and you are on your way to your work, RBB car registrations. You're happy to get to work, because you need to do an important task together with your co-worker who has the same position in the company as you. You need to register 25 vehicles to an important firm. At work, you talk to your co-worker about the task, how it has to be done and who needs to do what. The co-worker is your a fellow colleague who does not determine and evaluate the work you do; nor does he decide on your job contract terms. You feel excited to work together with your co-worker on this difficult task. At the end of the day, you're done with everything, and you go home. On Friday morning, your co-worker sits at your desk with an angry face. You automatically feel you've done something wrong and ask if everything is okay. Your co-worker tells you that you have made a huge mistake, by registering false addresses to the cars. On top of that you have confused three cars with each other. This is all very problematic, because this important firm pays a lot of money to RBB car registrations. You two get into an argument, because at the end of the day you two did the task together. However, your co-worker does not take any responsibility and tells you it's all your fault. He also tells you that he wishes he had done this with someone more competent. You feel really bad about it and offer your apology to the co-worker, as well as to the firm you did the car registrations for, even though you still feel it was a mistake of the both of you. Later that day, the co-worker enters the lunchroom where all employees eat their lunch. He brings everyone a coffee and cake because his wife had made cake at home. Everyone grabs their piece of cake and coffee and when you get to the table, there is nothing left for you. You look at your co-worker and he tells you, 'Oh my bad, I guess I forgot one person.'. You feel angry and intimidated, as well as confused and ashamed. You leave the lunchroom. Weeks

after the incident, your co-worker still only barely talks to you and refuses to work with you

again.