GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CLERICAL WORKERS DISPUTES OVER TASKS, INTERPERSONAL TREATMENT, AND EMOTION

by

Patricia Gwartney-Gibbs

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, approximately 54 million American women were in the labor force, and approximately 15 million of those (28%) worked in clerical and administrative support occupations. The largest clerical occupation is secretaries, comprised of nearly 5 million workers, of whom just 1.8% are men (Taeuber, 1991, p. 129; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990, p. 390). Despite the importance of clerical work for women workers in general, and secretarial work in particular, their daily routines and activities remain largely unstudied. While the scholarly literature includes historical accounts of the development of clerical work (Cohn, 1985; Strom, 1992), and there is no shortage of popular advice to secretaries and their bosses (Cassedy & Nuss-baum, 1983; Dight, 1986; Tissue, 1988; Breton, 1985; Foxman, 1990; Lazary, 1988), it seems that clerical work has been regarded as an unworthy or uninteresting subject of scholarly investigation.(4) The research reported here seeks to fill this gap, in part, by examining the everyday problems and disputes clerical workers experience in the workplace.

Workplace dispute resolution is a feature of the social organization of work within firms which, we have argued, contributes to other well-documented employment differentials between women and men. For the past several years, we have been developing and testing a theory of gender and dispute resolution in the workplace (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994; Lach & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1993). Our efforts have been motivated by frustration with the failure of large-scale statistical studies to fully account for well-documented employment differentials between women and men. No matter what the model fashioned, no matter what new twist on a variable or statistical technique, sociologists, economists, and scholars in related fields have been unable to fully explain gender differences in earnings, promotions, occupations, job turnover, job satisfaction, and other employment outcomes. We present workplace dispute resolution as an intra-organizational process which may create, maintain, or nullify well-documented cross-organizational patterns. Outlined below is our conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding gender differences in workplace dispute resolution.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Problems and disputes in the workplace are normal and perhaps unavoidable, like problems in families, neighborhoods, states, and other social groups. In the course of ordinary workday activities, disputes arise over issues such as work assignments, wages, discipline, job performance, and sexual harassment. Once a dispute is voiced, it can be pursued formally (e.g., in union-negotiated grievance procedures or similar forums in nonunion firms) or informally (e.g., in face-to-face conversation). The outcomes of pursuing a workplace dispute through formal or informal mechanisms can range from court settlements to abandoning the complaint.

We have proposed that these everyday origins, processes, and outcomes of workplace dispute resolution are patterned by sex, occupational sex segregation, and the social organization of work in firms (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994; Lach & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1993).

That is, women and the incumbents of nontraditional occupations have different types of workplace problems, different ways of resolving them, and different outcomes than men and the incumbents of traditional occupations. Moreover, we have argued that workplace disputing is patterned by the social organization of work within firms and that this interacts with gender roles and occupational sex segregation. We have drawn upon gender role theory and sex stratification theory in sociology, as well as selective aspects of industrial relations, organizational, and management theory, to develop hypotheses about how women's and men's patterns of workplace disputing are likely to differ systematically and how that may contribute to understanding employment inequality more generally.

Women and men experience many similar workplace problems, but some dispute origins are patterned by sex roles and cultural expectations. Gender role theory suggests that women are more likely to experience workplace problems involving family issues and interpersonal workplace relations than men (Stockard & Johnson, 1992). Gender role spillover theory indicates that women in traditional occupations are treated on the basis of sex role stereotypes (e.g., to be passive, cute, and friendly), no matter what their job requirements, skills, or personal predilections may be (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). In addition, incumbents of nontraditional occupations (both women and men) experience discrimination in many aspects of work (evaluation, task assignment, pay, and promotion) and worklife (teasing, condescension, social isolation, and exclusion) (Kanter, 1977a,b; Roos & Reskin, 1984; Segura, 1989; Swerdlow, 1989).

The processes by which women and men resolve their normal, everyday workplace disputes are also likely to vary systematically by their typical gender roles and by their jobs. Women's socialization to avoid conflict and doubt their own perceptions suggests that when they experience workplace difficulties they will be unlikely to pursue complaints (Stockard & Lach, 1989). Persons in nontraditional jobs experience pressure not to voice difficulties, in order to gain acceptance from the majority (Kanter, 1977a,b). They also lack access to informal networks of information and support to facilitate pursuing complaints (Roos & Reskin, 1984; Segura, 1989; Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1991).

The less women use workplace dispute resolution forums, the less often female-typed disputes will appear in formal settlement records. Women whose workplace difficulties persist unresolved are likely to experience greater job turnover and lower job satisfaction, and perform more poorly on the job, than those women and men whose problems are heard in a safe setting and resolved. If women in traditional, sex-typical occupations experience fewer difficulties than women in nontraditional occupations, and when they do experience difficulties have an easier time resolving them, these patterns may help explain the persistence of occupational sex segregation (Coles, 1986).

The social organization of work also structures workplace disputing. Large firms and unionized firms, industries, and occupations tend to provide regularized and well-exercised forums for resolving workplace problems. Small and non-unionized employers have greater latitude to invoke particularistic and arbitrary procedures to resolve workplace disputes (Westin & Felieu, 1988). Women workers are distributed differently

across firms, unions, industries and occupations than men in such a way as to lack access to more regularized forums (Gwartney-Gibbs & Hundley, 1988; Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1994). Even when such forums are present, the workplace environment for resolving difficulties may not serve the needs of women workers.

Within firms, dispute resolution forums establish environments for resolving day-to-day disputes. For example, union-negotiated grievance procedures typically involve numerous informal and formal steps at which a case must be proved and justified. Learning these many steps, or discovering that a particular problem is not covered by the union contract, can discourage problem solving for both women and men. On the other hand, firms with informal dispute resolution policies may not provide adequate safeguards for confidentiality and adequate training for persons in charge of them, which can also discourage problem solving. Gatekeepers of intra-organizational dispute processing (e.g., supervisors, personnel managers, union stewards) contribute to the problem-solving environment in how they hear complaints and suggest steps towards resolution (Reskin & Padavic, 1988). If gatekeepers are insensitive to women's unique workplace disputes, fewer will be voiced and pursued.

With this conceptual and theoretical framework of workplace disputing in mind, this article presents an analysis of one occupational group's experiences with one broad category of workplace disputes in two firms with contrasting dispute resolution forums. Specifically, we examine women and men clerical workers' difficulties in the workplace with what they call "personality conflicts" and how they attempt to resolve them with one firm's union-negotiated grievance procedure and another firm's open door policy. Our strategy for analysis is to allow clerical workers to speak in their own words about personality conflicts and how they deal with them. The analysis illuminates how sex roles and occupational sex segregation interact with workplace structures to create gender inequality in everyday workplace experiences.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data used for this analysis were collected as part of a larger study to examine gender inequality in workplace dispute resolution (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1991, 1993). For that study, interviews were conducted with 60 workers in two sex-segregated occupations: clerical work and maintenance work. While all respondents described a range of workplace disputes, clerical workers emphasized a type of dispute they called "personality conflicts." The present analysis is a close examination of the origins, processes, and outcomes of these self-reported personality conflicts for both women and men clerical workers.(5)

Thirty-four in-depth interviews with clerical workers (23 women and 11 men) were conducted in "Firm A," a unionized, public service firm, and "Firm B," a non-unionized manufacturing firm. Table I describes the sample distribution. The firms were selected for their contrasting procedures to resolve employees' workplace disputes; that is, Firm A has a union-negotiated grievance procedure, and Firm B has a widely admired (but rarely studied) open door policy. Both firms are subdivisions of much larger organizations, but each employs 3000-4000 workers at the sites studied and they have similar mixes of

professional, lower white-collar, and blue-collar employees. Both firms are regarded as "a good place to work" in their cities and, thus, many employees we spoke with had worked there long periods. The two firms are located in the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

We believe that conflict in the workplace is commonplace and that most, if not all, workers have stories to tell about their disputes. For this reason, we did not intentionally identify a population of workers involved in disputes from which to sample. Instead, clerical workers were selected in such a way as to maximize the range of problems and problem-solving methods experienced in the workplace. To do this, we varied the selection of respondents by demographic characteristics (sex, race/ethnicity, education, handicap, marital/parental status), employment characteristics (job tenure, promotions, union activism in Firm A), job title (receptionist, clerk, secretary, administrative assistant, word processor), and the nature of workplace disputes and their resolution (type of problem, resolution processes, results). Interviewees are not statistically representative of clerical workers at Firm A or Firm B, but we satisfied our goal of hearing a wide range of accounts of problems and problem-solving, without having to interview hundreds in a random sample. While the sample design does not allow us to generalize to other settings or other organizations, the initial findings from this research are used to develop a conceptual model of workplace dispute resolution which can be tested in future empirical studies.

Table I. Number of Clerical Workers by Sex and Firm

Sex	Firm A grievance procedure	Firm B open-door policy	Total
Female	12	11	23
Male	6	5	11
Total	18	16	34

We attempted to gain access to clerical workers at both Firm A and Firm B through a top-down approach. Both management and the clerical workers' union at Firm A supported our research and provided a list of workers. Firm A interviewees came from volunteers to a union newsletter article, cold calls, and networks. Interviewees were allowed time during working hours to participate in interviews. Our efforts to arrange similar access at Firm B fell through after our management contact left the country for a new assignment. A sympathetic employee provided us with a list of clerical workers at Firm B, and we turned to a bottom-up approach, making contacts through cold calls and networks of clerical workers without the imprimatur of management. While not officially condoned, most interviews at firm B also took place during working hours at the worksite.

In semi-structured, in-depth interviews, we asked clerical workers to describe in their own words the problems and disputes they encountered in the workplace, including: how disputes began and developed; who they talked with; advice and support received; the decision to pursue the issue or not; coping; what happened in meetings with supervisors, union stewards, and others; how they were treated; action taken; what they wanted and whether it was achieved; how the issue was finally, if ever, resolved; satisfaction; and the aftermath of the dispute resolution process. In order to avoid pre-empting interviewees' own notions of workplace disputes, we allowed those in Firm A to discuss issues which were not grievable under their union contract (and this turned out to be important; see Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1993). In addition, basic demographic information and job descriptions were obtained. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Each interview lasted at least 90 minutes, and several took more than 2 hours.

We began the interviews with the idea that respondents would talk about the "natural history" of their disputes, from beginning to end. As we proceeded through the interviews, a model of dispute resolution in the workplace emerged: respondents discussed their disputes in terms of the origins or sources of conflict, processes they used to resolve the dispute, and outcomes of the dispute resolution. We used this worker-inspired conceptual model of dispute resolution in the workplace as an organizing device in analyzing the interview transcripts. We looked for the themes or patterns in the stories workers told about the origins, processes, and outcomes of their everyday disputes.

Interviewees discussed roughly 125 separate workplace problems and disputes. This article concerns the most frequent, and most enigmatic, issue clerical workers discussed, namely what they called "personality conflicts." About 40% of the clerical workers we spoke with, both women and men, reported experiencing personality conflicts in varying degrees of intensity. Personality conflicts developed mainly between supervisors and supervisees and less often between co-workers. They occurred mainly over how work should be accomplished and how people treated each other in interpersonal relations, but these issues often intertwined in webs of feelings of loss, self-blame, and animosity. Few clerical workers accused their protagonists of being intrinsically bad persons. Rather, as will be shown below, most comments showed thoughtfulness about the nature of both the situation and the person and an effort to get along as well as possible in the workplace.

FINDINGS

Our findings below are organized around two broad domains of personality conflicts which arose in the interviews: how tasks should be done (including training) and interpersonal treatment (i.e., civility). As will become apparent, however, these two domains frequently intertwine and become emotional. Table II outlines the sources of personality conflicts for clerical workers at Firm A and Firm B. While men clerical workers' disputes were often similar to women's, we present a special section of findings for them because they more often invoked intrinsic, particularly sex-stereotyped, explanations and claimed they had "no problems."

Disputes Over How Work Should Be Accomplished

Clerical work seems to be one of those jobs that managers regard as "natural" for women workers, as common and normal as homemaking. There is little formal training, apart from general literacy, and few explicit rules about how work should be carried out within organizations. Rather, a good personality (especially if greeting the public), some initiative, and the ability to juggle lots of little tasks at the same time (typing letters, photocopying, telephone answering, directing clients) seem to be the main criteria for getting and keeping a clerical job. Note that most of these characteristics fit female stereotypes. One of our interviewees summed it up this way:

A global thing about clerical jobs is there are a million details with no training. You can't train a clerk to cover all the details that are not written down anywhere, and can't be written down anywhere.

Mary(6) provided an example of how this can develop into conflict:

> My supervisor is the kind of person who needs to make copies of everything. She even has set up some kind of system that actually makes more work for her. She likes to be very organized. But that's just the way she is. I feel like there are a lot of steps that can be cut to get our work done. But she seems to feel personally that I should be doing, feeling and thinking things in her way.

This quote illustrates how disputes can arise over how work should be done, but in the last sentence, Mary also showed how issues about work tasks and interpersonal relations combine. She feels that her supervisor not only wants Mary to do her work a certain way, but she also wants her to "feel" and "think" like her. Mary elaborates on how tasks and feelings get combined:

> My supervisor feels I should be personally sensitive to how much work she is doing, like I should go up to her and ask if she needs help. But I'm not going to do that. She needs to come to me and say "I have this thing coming up next week and I'm going to need your help. Can you set up a slice of time?" If she would be up front, I could do it. She makes a point to tell me "I worked till seven last night and I'm really tired." I don't know what she wants me to do with that news. At first I said, "You really shouldn't be working so hard. You could stress yourself out." But then she'd say, "Oh no, this work has to be done." I worked here a year before she did and the other woman never had to work overtime.

Mary perceives that her supervisor wants her to volunteer her time without having to be asked, i.e., that she should feel her supervisor's needs without having to be told. Mary offers some sympathy, but fundamentally she believes that her supervisor organizes tasks inefficiently. Her supervisor is indirect in expressing her needs, and Mary is indirect in her resistance: she won't do what her supervisor wants her to do until she expresses it. This creates reservoirs of unresolved feelings between them.

Wendy is not so sure of herself as Mary. She described intense surveillance by her supervisor, a professional at Firm A, including watching over her shoulder as she typed, listening in on telephone calls, and peering into her work area at the beginning and end of the day to check on her arrival and departure times.

> When I'm typing, he says "Are you sure that's right?" and it brings doubts to my mind. Or he says "I gave you that report; where is it?" I search all over the office and then he says "Oh well, I've got it right here." But there are no apologies.

Her supervisor's surveillance made her nervous and undermined her self-esteem as she accomplished her daily tasks, but Wendy cannot express this. Wendy also revealed what can be regarded as a double standard in the expression of feelings in supervisor-supervisee relations: "He has raised his voice at me, but when I used the same tone of voice, I was called unprofessional." Wendy feels that this treatment by her supervisor is "mental abuse," but she also feels that "You just have to absorb it; secretaries cannot talk back." Thus, Wendy had to suppress her feelings.

Personality conflicts among the clerical workers we interviewed seem to include a lot of suppressed feelings. Valerie's statement below shows how a tiny issue about a work task combined with feelings to create an explosive situation.

> My supervisor was consistently a roadblock in my paperwork. She did not understand the system, did not try to understand what I was doing, and didn't want to understand it. She once came to me with a piece of paperwork that was on a certain type of paper that you can't correct; you can paint it over, but you can't re-type it. She made me paint out one thing and type in a letter "a." She would bring me back my work that she knows nothing about and say "Do this over," or "Do it this way," and not know what she was talking about. The "a" would never have made any difference at all. She'd write these treacle-y notes and I would get them and have to do what she said, whether or not it was stupid. She had a fascist attitude about her and directed angry tirades at me. When I'm not angry, I understand she has to control the hairs on everybody's head in the office and is terrified if somebody seems to be out of control and she can't make them do what she wants them to do. She made that my problem; it was her problem, but she made it my problem every damn day.

Valerie believed that the corrections to her work were arbitrary and capricious, and it made her angry. Still, it is apparent that she has tried to understand her supervisor's "terror," need "to control hairs," and anger. From the tone of Valerie's comments, it is also clear that the battle lines between she and her supervisor had hardened.

Disputes over how work should be accomplished are particularly evident when training new workers. Hazel, an old-timer at Firm B, expresses her impatience with a new clerical worker:

> I have a lot of knowledge but it's taken me years to get there. This new employee comes to me as a resource for everything. Instead of doing my job, I'm handling interruptions with this person. Some are warranted, and it's easy to juggle those. But you have to commit a lot of stuff to memory, and I'd like to see some incentive on her part. I know she feels bad, but I don't want to still be doing this two years down the road. I'm not looking for something personal, you know. But for teamwork, for cohesiveness within the group, we should be able to get these things ironed out. At this point, my standards and hers don't match.

Hazel reveals how training a new employee is irritating because it interrupts her daily work and because the new person seems to take advantage of Hazel's experience instead of exerting herself to learn the job. Her later comments also reveal a theme reiterated by Firm B clerical workers, namely, the importance of teamwork. Hazel can justify her irritation with the new worker by invoking the team work ethic of Firm B.

Sylvia is a roving office worker at Finn A, who takes over others' tasks when they are gone on leaves or vacations. This means that she is constantly being trained for new clerical settings. Her current supervisor

> ...is supposed to be completely training me for this position. But she deliberately withholds information from me, so I will look foolish, or dumb, or make some mistake, and get called in by the manager. She's never been trained to train someone before. I can appreciate that. I can be very understanding. I can flow with the lot. But she's really becoming too much. Maybe it's because I don't stand up for myself.

Sylvia attributes motives to her supervisor (wanting to make Sylvia look foolish) and attempts to understand her supervisor's inexperience, but she also blames herself for not defending herself to her supervisor. The real issue with her supervisor, however, seems to be how she is treated over the issue of training, not the training itself. This is expressed in Sylvia's explanation of what happened when she replaced her supervisor during a 4-week vacation:

> I'm probably 98% trained for her job now. While she was on vacation I didn't have any troubles, and yet the minute she comes back, I'm her underling and she orders me around, when I'm real confident in her position. She doesn't have to order me around. I know what needs to be done. I'm a self-starter.

Sylvia now thinks her supervisor is inherently "not a very nice person," who has said "some pretty terrible things to people, and ... to me." She expresses her feelings of disappointment: "At first, I was very attracted to her. I thought working together was really going to be fun. But that wasn't the case."

Sylvia's case illustrates how personality conflicts are a constellation of disputable issues, interpersonal treatment, and feelings. That is, Sylvia's dispute with her supervisor arose over training, particularly withholding essential training information. But this dispute

intertwines with how her supervisor treats her, specifically ordering her around like an "underling" and saying "terrible things." This in turn creates difficult feelings, specifically disappointment that a job she hoped would be "fun" is not at all fun.

Computer training was a frequent source of problems with clerical workers. Mary's comments below show how having a computer plopped onto her desk with little instruction but high expectation intertwined with the personality conflicts she had with her supervisor:

> My supervisor got a brand-new computer when all the departments were getting them. She gave me her old one, and said "I bent over backwards to get you a computer," as if to make me feel grateful, but I knew she hadn't done anything special. I hadn't done anything on a computer before, so it was just sitting there. I was supposed to be typing onto disk, but I didn't have any training. She showed me how to type a letter, but not how to do the tabs. She gave me her notes from her wordprocessing class, and I went to an "Introduction to Microcomputers" class, where they show you how to turn it on and off and how to use the mouse. But it wasn't enough; it didn't have anything to do with wordprocessing. She expected me to figure out everything for myself, like she said she had learned. But that wasn't true; her husband came in after work and on weekends and trained her. But she still didn't even know how to put tabs in a letter.

Was Mary experiencing a problem over computer training or was the problem really the mixed messages she got from her supervisor? On one hand, she had inadequate training to do the wordprocessing expected of her and (in other comments) not enough hours in the day to train herself. On the other hand, her supervisor's communications to her were confusing, for example, saying she had "bent over backwards" to get Mary a computer, and saying Mary could train herself on it like she had done, both of which Mary knew were half true at best. Mary thinks this is another example of how her supervisor wants her to feel a certain way, in this case, grateful. As previously discussed, Mary is self-admittedly resistant to her supervisor's indirect expressions of need. Their interpersonal problems seem to be less about the computer than about Mary violating another of her boss's many unwritten "feeling rules."

Disputes Over Interpersonal Treatment

Co-workers' and supervisors'/supervisees' treatment of each other was very important to the clerical workers we spoke with. It could cause them to feel wonderful or to feel awful. Sometimes it seemed to us that clerical workers' offices were hothouses of unresolved feelings about poor interpersonal treatment. We have seen above how problems related to work tasks can combine with problems related to interpersonal treatment. The cases below provide more detailed examples. One clerical worker reported that her supervisor

> would say things out loud to the temporary worker--"Oh, you do such beautiful work. You typed this so nicely. It's so nice to have someone here who can type so well!" Little jabs.

Her supervisor's compliment to the temporary worker was a not-so-subtle invidious comparison, evident but not explicit. If the supervisor had complaints about her work, she wasn't saying so directly. The clerical worker experienced this lack of civility not as a task-related criticism, but as a personality conflict with her supervisor.

The manner in which supervisors address employees about issues seems to be as important as the issue itself. Alec, a mail clerk, reported that he and his supervisor frequently went through "two to three weeks of very clashing interaction" over authority issues.

> I'll walk into the room in the morning and the first thing she says is something like "I don't want you to assume responsibility for letting people know this, this, or this," or "Who gave you the authority to work overtime last night, again?" No preface, no "Good morning Alec." It will be the first thing I hear. I'll tell her the mail had to get done and nobody else was there to do it.

What is more problematic here, Alec usurping authority, or how his supervisor addresses him about it? The two intertwine inescapably. Recall that a similar pattern was evident in the previous section in Valerie's case.

Karen's case also involves issues of authority and treatment. Her co-worker was promoted and became her "quote/unquote supervisor."

> All of a sudden, she acted like "Now I'm over you and you have to do what I say." My former supervisor agreed with her. They were virtually saying, "You have to bow down to her," and I resented that. She made me feel like I was not worthy in her presence; she treated me as a low life. She wouldn't say "Would you..." or "Could you...", but "You are going to..." as if I had to worship the ground she walked on. I found that very demeaning. It got to the point that I couldn't even leave the office without asking her permission.

Undoubtedly any worker passed over for promotion, like Karen, feels some indignation, but her new supervisor also appears to have run amok on control issues. Karen reveals how belittled and resentful it made her feel.

When Susan transferred to a new position, she also was treated differently by a former co-worker.

> We used to work very closely and were good friends. But then I started this new job, and it was just like she was out to get me. She told another secretary that I was giving out confidential information, her salary information. But I had no clue what she was earning. My boss was new and I was new, and so he had no clue what I'm really like.

Gossip among co-workers isn't rare, of course, but malicious gossip from a former friend hurts and confuses. Susan was rightfully concerned about how it would influence her relationship with her new supervisor. Susan's case repeats another theme, expressed initially by Sylvia, namely, the difficultly in dealing emotionally with former friends.

Betrayal, hurt, and confusion infuse the workplace with feelings which interfere with accomplishing tasks.

While many clerical workers make an effort to understand the co-workers and supervisors they have difficulties with, others turn to explanations based on the inherent nature of the person. After hearing complaints about the organization of a 400-page manual she prepared, Birdie re-organized it to "create a logical and sensible format." Implementing the change required several signatures, including her supervisor's and a professional's.

> When I went to talk with my supervisor I brought the professional with me, because I've noticed if I talk to her alone she won't listen. We sat down and I laid the whole proposal out, explaining what all is affected, and why, and the results--the whole schpiel. She kept interrupting me and trying to change the subject. I have a sharp tongue, but I kept my cool and didn't fall into the little traps for arguments. When we were all finished, she talked to the professional, even though it was my idea, and told him how nicely written it was. He said "What do you mean? Birdie wrote it." She snapped at me, and that's when I thought this isn't just a personality conflict. This woman is harassing me; she's trying to discredit me.

Not receiving credit for a good idea was part of Birdie's problem with her supervisor, but how she was treated in the process was equally important, again showing how issues about tasks and interpersonal treatment combine. Birdie goes on to explain her supervisor's behavior in terms of her inherent characteristics:

> The woman is very power hungry, very competitive. If she perceives you know more than her or if she doesn't like you, heaven help you! She will move heaven and earth to try to get rid of you one way or another. You are continually put down, told you're nothing but a clerk. If you challenge or try to persist, it's not good. She's very authoritarian and dictator-like. Pardon my language, but if you were on her shit list and you sneezed, that was it.

Despite this devastating analysis, Birdie concluded her story with the team-building comments typical of our Firm B interviewees.

> I have to live--we all have to live together. We spend most of our lives here [at Firm B]. Let's make it civilized.

Men Clerical Workers' Workplace Disputing

Men clerical workers are rare. We tracked down 11 to interview in order to maximize the range of clerical workers' stories about workplace disputing. Table III compares women and men clerical workers' responses to personality conflicts. Most of the men's workplace difficulties were similar to women clerical workers'. Ted, for example, demonstrated his awareness of office feelings in the following comments:

There was a person working in the office who didn't get along with anybody very well. She had two sides that were very extreme. One was very warm and friendly, and the other was very cold and distant. It was really hard to deal with. We were friends for awhile, and then almost overnight, she totally shut herself off. You could feel a knot in her stomach, like something was eating at her. It just became impossible for me to interact with her. All the interaction was with other people, sort of skipping around her. It didn't feel right, but she refused to be part of what was happening.

Like women clerical workers, he was also distressed by the loss of his co-worker's friendship when she changed. However, he attributes the changes to her extreme mood swings, and claims no responsibility for the changed relationship. Yet, based on data we collected from both parties, we suspect he may have unsuccessfully pursued a romantic relationship with her.

Ted's comments demonstrate the tendency of the men we interviewed to attribute workplace problems to something or someone else and to something inherent in the other person. While our women interviewees did attribute problems to others, as evidenced by Birdie, who described her supervisor as "authoritarian," "dictator-like" and "power hungry," women often attempted to understand and explain situations which contribute to personality conflicts. For example, Mary contextualized her difficulties with her supervisor over computer training by acknowledging that her supervisor provided her with what information she could, but her supervisor's expectations exceeded the training.

Only the men we interviewed, however, spoke of gender qualities as an inherent issue in personality conflicts. This is apparent in Alec's discussion of negative comments on his recent annual evaluation:

The negatives were based on personality rather than job performance. The job performance issues were petty, like the cash log. She insisted the date on the cash log be underlined. Nobody does it, but I was the one reprimanded for not doing it.

He explains his supervisor's pettiness in this way:

My boss and I have very strong clashing egos. I think there's a gender problem in there, as a male working in a clerical job. I've never worked for a woman, but I never had a problem working with four women. Maybe it's because I'm a male in a subordinate position, and I have typical male ego problems. I tend to take over, or at least tend to be very assertive in positions that I'm in. My boss, although she's very assertive, is maybe more sensitive than most I've dealt with, in terms of thinking I'm trying to take over. She does a lot of protecting her turf.

He continues:

She is a very frustrated individual on a social level. I don't think she deals well with her relationships with men. I think she's not dealing well with menopause. What I'm saying sounds sexist to me, because it's just so typical of what I want

to avoid in dealing with women. At the same time, I have to be aware of it. I really feel that there's a hostility that comes out for some reason on a personal level that has nothing to do with work. I simply happen to be the handy male focus now.

Alec's comments show thoughtfulness about his own culpability in the personality conflicts with his boss. Moreover, he recognizes that his explanations of his supervisor's behavior can be interpreted as sexist. Nevertheless, he resorts to sex-typed explanations based upon his supervisor's innate characteristics, rather than considering aspects of the situation which may contribute to their personality conflict.

Bob believes his supervisor is trying to build a case to terminate him. His portrayal of her displays what he believes is an unduly autocratic attitude, although he does resist labeling his supervisor an essentially "horrible" person.

> My supervisor is very, very harsh and unreasonable. I'm having a very difficult time with her. It's a personal conflict that I have no control over. I'm a sitting duck, trapped, with nowhere to go. Any mistake I make, or that she thinks I make, she overreacts to. She's not a horrible person; we used to get along fine, so it's nothing I'm aware of in her personal nature.

As he tries to explain his supervisor's behavior, Bob insinuates that she uses her gender to manipulate her superiors:

> One of the things I see her do in dealing with managers is to break down into tears. Then they feel sorry for her and leave her alone. So, she seems to do a lot of game-playing, to make herself appear as a victim. Then the managers back off and roll over. It's a very, very difficult situation for everyone involved.

Both Alec's and Bob's explanations fit our men interviewees' tendency to find something intrinsically problematic in the persons with whom they were having personality conflicts. What Alec and Bob find problematic is gender stereotyped behavior, for example, "not dealing well with menopause" and strategic crying.

Perhaps one of our more interesting findings is the tendency of men clerical workers to report that they have "no problems" in the workplace.(7) But then they go on to tell us of incidents and situations highly similar to those called problematic by women. This pattern is best illustrated in the interview with Donald, a 9-year veteran clerical worker at Firm A. After initially claiming that he experienced no conflicts in the workplace, Donald mentioned "tremendous stress" learning the job, chronic understaffing, the difficulty of having four or five professionals to work for, and frequent turnover in the office's receptionist position. But all of these were "not major incidents," and if there was a problem, it was "very brief" or "just a matter of getting used to things." When asked about interpersonal relations on the job, Donald denied any problems:

> Personality conflicts are rare. There have been a couple of people I haven't gotten along with perfectly. But you usually don't have to work so closely with someone that it becomes a real problem, unless you make it one.... There are

> sometimes communication problems with the professionals or with supervisors. It's been difficult to sort out what had the most priority. A lot of that is my own judgment now and I've gotten better at it.

When asked about learning to use computers, Donald said:

> I was told "You will learn this" and that approach didn't appeal to me. I have learned to use it and I can see that it might be useful, but I don't have one of my own and I don't need it.

This ironhanded approach to training was part of many other clerical workers' personality conflicts, as presented above, but not for Donald. Indeed, Donald has refused even to use the department's new electronic typewriters, relying instead on his trusty old IBM Selectric.

Finally, Donald was asked about a personality issue that we knew of in advance: A client had publicly claimed to have been treated rudely by Donald and called for his dismissal. Donald recognizes that "I have kind of a confrontative personality," but this case, he said, "wasn't my fault. The guy went off the deep end." His supervisor "didn't say one thing or the other. I assume he didn't see any problem with it."

Donald explained away each issue, effectively claiming that none were significant workplace disputes. Donald was not expectional; we found similar claims in many interviews with men clerical workers in both firms, but not among women. At Firm B, however, the strong emphasis on teamwork seemed to affect the tone of interviewees' reports. David, for example, also had conflicts with his supervisor:

> I work for a very difficult manager, a perfectionist. He has very high expectations of the people who work for him, but he also had extremely high expectations of himself. I have a lot of respect for somebody like that. Although sometimes we disagree on a professional level, we still remain friends.

David's supervisor lacked social skills and was very demanding, but David seemed unwilling or unable to label this as a personality conflict; indeed, he expresses his admiration for his boss. Firm B's team culture may explain David's report, but it is interesting to note that both David and Donald have male supervisors.

In summary, only men reported having no problems in the workplace. In contrast, our women interviewees had very little difficulty identifying or naming workplace conflicts in varying levels of intensity. When men did report problems, they were, overall, similar to those expressed by women. But in their explanations of personality conflicts, they were more likely to attribute them to intrinsic characteristics of the protagonist, while women more often invoked situational explanations.

What Do Clerical Workers Do About Workplace Disputes?

When personality conflicts are multiplied over hours and days, workers' situations can become personally intolerable and the situations can interfere with work which is supposed to be done. Tensions in work groups are not uncommon, of course, among men or women, but the women we interviewed spoke more often of problems with personality conflicts and TABULAR DATA OMITTED seemed to be more upset and derailed in their work by them than men. What clerical workers do about these situations is constrained by their employers' institutionalized dispute resolution forums and the corporate culture surrounding them. Table IV compares the dispute resolution forums in Firm A and Firm B and their responses to personality conflicts.

In the extreme, some of the behaviors associated with personality conflicts can be called harassment, which is grievable under Firm A's union contract and certainly discussable under Firm B's open door policy. But more often, the personality conflicts are subtle--a meaningful look or a snide comment--and, therefore, difficult to name or authenticate. As Karen told us, "If you break a leg, you can see the effect. But if it's mental, how can you really prove it?"

At Firm A, the union-negotiated contract includes "mental harassment" as a grievable offense. Karen grieved and won the personality conflicts she experienced under this rubric, but the experience was so demeaning, particularly her required interviews with a psychologist (which included her sexual history, her childhood upbringing, and other experiences she considered not remotely tied to personality conflicts), she fears her experience will become part of workplace legend and deter others from pursuing this line of defense. Less extreme personality conflicts women experience daily are not specifically covered by the union contract.

The gatekeepers of formal dispute resolution forums, which at Firm A are the union stewards, are very important in a worker's decision to pursue a grievance. If a union steward does not recognize personality conflicts as grievable or worth investigating, workers will be inhibited from pursuing the issue. Despite Karen's successful case, most union stewards seem to take the attitude of this one about personality conflicts:

> I've talked to workers who've told me "My supervisor's driving me nuts because they're doing this and doing that." It's really hard to prove any of that stuff. They tell me lots of times that they come across as being the terrible person. If it's really an out-and-out illegal thing that the supervisor is doing, then you can get 'em for it. But if it's just subtle little things, it's really hard.

Another union steward in Firm A dismissed a case involving racism accusations saying "basically it's personality conflicts," about which he felt he could do little other than listen: "Maybe these people spilling their guts diffused it." He continued:

> All the women involved came to me and they all told me different stories. I tried to get information out of it, but the stories were so lacking in any real concrete detail that I couldn't think of anything to do.

In Valerie's case, discussed above, her supervisor eventually filed a disciplinary work plan for insubordination (or lack of respect for the supervisor). Neither Valerie nor the union had contract-protected means for holding the supervisor equally accountable on personality issues. Union representatives attended a series of disciplinary meetings with Valerie, but basically the union could do little else to help in this problem perceived as a personality conflict.

If formal workplace dispute resolution forums are unwilling or unable to take personality conflicts seriously, it is no wonder women feel discouraged from taking their problems to the union. What do clerical workers do instead? Women consistently report using lateral transfers to move away from problems rather than using the grievance procedure. Indeed, seven of the 12 women clerical workers at Firm A had requested and received at least one lateral transfer in order to "solve" a dispute in the workplace. Valerie held five different positions in seven years in this pattern of transferring to step out of disputes.

Many women, however, just live with personality conflicts on the job. As Sylvia said, "I bit the bullet and went with it." Wendy "just absorbed it." But living with the problem doesn't make it go away. In particular, personality conflicts seem to generate a great deal of emotional work for women. One said "I thought maybe I could change myself" to resolve the office tensions. Another woman said:

> I couldn't allow myself to relax at all. I couldn't allow myself to operate the way I normally would. I held myself in check very carefully. I was careful to be very calm, to not ever complain. It was very hard on me.

Needless to say, "excessive emotional work" is not a disputable claim under the union contract.

Fewer men than women recognized personality conflicts as an issue. For example, Donald denied that there were any problems at all in his office. When men identified personality conflicts, they reported the problems were resolved with little effort on their part. Alec's supervisor, with whom he had personality conflicts over authority, retired several months after the interview and Alec was hired into her place. The "cold" co-worker Ted complained of transferred to another office. We interviewed her for this study and know she transferred in part to escape the feelings in the office he speaks of. (This is another example of a woman taking responsibility for emotional issues and using a lateral transfer to resolve a workplace dispute.)

One example of a male clerical worker who took responsibility for resolving a personality conflict used his sex role to his advantage:

> If my supervisor gives me too much trouble, I just yell at him.... Being in the union, I hear women complain about |tensions with supervisors^. But are they going to try to bully me? No! Because I'm older than some of the supervisors and I'm not a woman.

At Firm B, the open-door policy is provided unilaterally by the company (i.e., not negotiated bilaterally with a union). Such a policy recognizes that workplace problems

exist, and theoretically all issues, large and small, may be taken to one's supervisor, one's supervisor's supervisor, and on up the line. Informal relations are key to the effectiveness of the open-door policy, for employees must be comfortable with their supervisor and familiar with their supervisor's supervisor to go above with questions, complaints, and comments. Moreover, they must believe they are going to be heard. Firm B's policy, and its corporate culture, is consistent with popular texts which applaud "visible management" or "management by wandering around" (Peters & Waterman, 1982).

Our field work suggests that most Firm B employees believe steadfastly in the notion that upper management is completely available to hear workers' complaints, comments, and suggestions. Indeed, several interviewees recounted a story of a Firm B worker who was so dissatisfied that he "went all the way to the top," transported by corporate jet, to voice his complaint. (Our interview with this person indicated the story had become exaggerated in re-telling and had taken on the aspect of a corporate legend or myth.)

Conversely, we often sensed or were told that Firm B interviewees felt disloyal telling us about problems they experienced, particularly those without successful resolution. We believe that Firm B's carefully constructed corporate culture is so strong that when employees have disputes they cannot resolve using the open door policy, their feelings are denied or contained, for theoretically all employment disputes are resolvable under the policy. Moreover, Firm B has a policy of not allowing employees to transfer laterally to extricate themselves from personality conflicts; transfers are allowed only after such conflicts have been resolved. We have evidence documenting how employees avoided this rule by claiming personality conflicts were resolved when they were not or by transferring out of a position at the first sign of personality conflicts developing. This evidence underscores how Firm B employees tend to hold their own feelings in abeyance when the open door policy doesn't work. Unresolved disputes reflect badly on them as individuals, on teamwork and unity in their work group, and on the corporate culture more generally.

DISCUSSION

Many of the personality conflicts our interviewees recounted were implicitly about their lack of power in the female-dominated clerical work force. Clerical workers' struggles to determine job content, job performance, and even feelings toward co-workers and supervisors remains largely unspoken, but the nature of the struggle is highlighted in the way men and women clerical workers talk about their relationships with their supervisors. Contrast, for example, the male clerical worker who yells at his supervisors when they cause him too much trouble with Valerie who is charged with insubordination when she fails to placate her supervisor. Women told us of disciplinary work plans that included requirements to "be nicer" to supervisors, while Alec's "menopausal supervisor" never placed Alec on discipline despite their regular "two to three weeks of very clashing interactions" over authority.

Cultural expectations of women's behavior spill over into expectations of typically female clerical work, suggesting a malleable and passive workforce which can be molded to an organization's needs (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). Without a culturally or organizationally

approved language for talking about problems in the workplace, clerical workers re-name their daily disputes as "personality conflicts." Personality conflicts are more appropriate and understandable problems for women to experience in the workplace, reflecting the sex-role stereotyping of women as more concerned with relations and emotions. Yet, organizations are ill-equipped to respond to concerns expressed as personality conflicts.

Personality conflicts inherently involve emotion. But feelings have little place at work. Emotions are legitimate when expressed in private, when referring to others, and when they concern past events. Positive emotions (joy, affection) seem to be acceptable in the workplace, but negative emotions (anger, loss, sadness) are not. Gatekeepers of the dispute resolution processes in Finn A and Firm B found it difficult to understand the negative emotions expressed by clerical workers; emotions didn't "make sense," and gatekeepers could not get control of the problematic situations. Gatekeepers routinely discounted the importance and complexity of clerical workers' feelings, dismissing emotionally-laden conflicts as mere personality conflicts. Gatekeepers' lack of recognition of the emotional environment of the workplace and the emotional environment's effects on workers de-legitimizes workers' real experiences. Since women are much more prone to expressing disputes about feelings in the workplace than men, women's experiences are disproportionately de-legitimized.

Firm A's union-negotiated contract seemed particularly insensitive to personality conflicts. The contract has no provisions for personality conflicts, unless they escalate to unusual extremes, such as harassment or insubordination. In addition, the forum for resolving contract disputes, the grievance procedure, is perceived by workers as adversarial. As in legal systems, grievants do not speak for themselves. They are represented by a steward, if they can convince a steward to represent their interests. The grievance procedure is intended to provide a neutral framework for dispute resolution, but the participants enter the arena as advocates with positions to be strategically defended. Objectivity, rationality, and justice are the bywords of the grievance procedure, leaving little room for subjectivity, emotion, or care.

Firm B's open-door policy is intended to operate more like mediation than confrontation. Employees are invited into their supervisors' open doors to express any workplace difficulties they may be having. Unlike union contracts, there are no guidelines to delimit what can and cannot be considered problematic. If employees do not achieve satisfaction with their supervisor, they are invited to go higher--to their supervisor's supervisor, and on up the line. Ideally, mediation is designed to include the expression of emotion. When people tell their stories in mediation hearing, mediators are trained to recognize emotion as a signifier of "what's really going on." At the beginning of mediation sessions, emotional expression is even encouraged, "to get it out on the table" in order to be able to focus on the "real" problem. This implies, however, that emotions themselves cannot be problematic; indeed, a byword of mediation is to "separate the people from the problem." At Firm B, supervisors are not trained mediators. The open door policy is "mediation-like," but it is not mediation per se. Moreover, the company culture, particularly the emphasis on teamwork, discourages the expression of interpersonal workplace disputes. Indeed, lateral transfers (used so successfully by Firm A's clerical workers) are not officially allowed until personality conflicts were resolved.

Neither Firm A's nor Firm B's workplace dispute resolution forums, while contrasting in key ways, appears to be particularly receptive to issues concerning personality conflicts or the emotional expression which accompanies them. In both settings, workers' accounts of their experiences were discounted by supervisors, union stewards, and other gatekeepers. Their language and emotion was translated, lifted out of context, made one-dimensional, and defused. Those few who were able to resolve personality conflicts through formal procedures became workplace legends which deterred others from pursuing the same problems.

CONCLUSIONS

Our interviews with clerical workers confirm several of our ideas about workplace disputing. First, the origins of workplace problems and disputes appear to be different for women than for men. Consistent with gender roles, women workers displayed more sensitivity to problems associated with interpersonal relations in the workplace than men, more often voicing workplace disputes concerning personality conflicts. But they also described how difficult it is to resolve personality conflicts through formalized channels. Rarely do personality conflicts with supervisors and co-workers escalate to a point that they can be labeled or proven as harassment. Rather, these everyday, subtle occurrences in work settings eat away at women workers, causing them intense "emotional labor" which can interfere with their main tasks (Hochschild, 1983; James, 1989).

Men clerical workers' relative lack of concern for personality conflicts in the workplace also may be explained in terms of gender role theory. Men, theoretically, are socialized into instrumental roles which leave little room for discussion or analysis of everyday living. Such roles give them little experience or motivation to discuss workplace disputes which concern the expression of emotion.(8) Moreover, men's instrumental roles allow them to invoke explanations about emotional behavior in the workplace which are "essentialist" in nature, i.e., which involve co-workers' and supervisors' innate, and often gender-stereotyped, characteristics, rather than contextualizing their explanations in terms of the problematic situation.

These points underlie our second major observation, that there are gender differences in the processes of dispute resolution in the workplace. Personality conflicts are not often recognized by institutional dispute resolution forums, and indeed they are sometimes summarily dismissed by the gatekeepers of those forums. To the extent that women more often experience workplace disputes associated with personality differences, and to the extent that formal workplace dispute resolution mechanisms are not designed to deal with them, women workers will less often approach or enter workplace dispute-resolution processes, and therefore less often show up in formal complaint records. Moreover, stories of one worker's bad experience with an unsympathetic gatekeeper can become part of workplace legend and dissuade future workers from pursuing their workplace disputes through formal channels (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1991, 1993). This in turn can create a climate of alienation, in which pursuing resolution of workplace problems is perceived as risky or not worth the effort.

Women's propensity to use lateral transfers instead of institutional procedures to solve personality conflicts has several possible outcomes. One is that problems which do enter the formal processes are nonrepresentative of day-to-day conflicts experienced by women at work. Another outcome of lateral transfers in Firm A is that several women clerical workers who transferred found that the best new jobs available to them were not covered by the union contract or its grievance procedure. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the use of lateral transfers to solve problems in the workplace is that it is likely to put women workers at a disadvantage in terms of human capital, i.e., job-specific training and expertise. Employers are more likely to invest in job training and offer promotional opportunities to employees who stay on the job. Our male interviewees did not use transfers to solve workplace disputes and our female interviewees did; likewise, our male interviewees had longer average job tenure than our female interviewees. High levels of turnover and labor force intermittency have long been used by human capital theorists as an explanation for lower earnings of women workers. To the extent that lateral transfers are associated with lower job-specific skills and training for women workers than men, turnovers internal to an organization also may lower the earnings of women who use lateral transfers to resolve conflict.

This examination of women and men clerical workers' workplace disputing offers a partial test of the conceptual and theoretical framework raised at the beginning of this article. We find that gender role theory explains some of the sex-specific patterns of workplace disputing in a single highly sex-segregated occupational category. But individually-oriented explanations, like gender role theory, do not fully account for women and men clerical workers' different experiences. Rather, our findings indicate that roles interact with work structures (the presence of a union, the nature of the formal dispute resolution policy) to create different access and experiences with workplace disputing for women and men.

Finally, gender differences in workplace disputing appear to be part of intra-organizational processes which contribute to broader patterns of employment inequality observed in studies based upon sample survey and census data. Specifically, our findings suggest that the structure and functioning of workplace dispute resolution forums constrain women's experiences in ways that lower their human capital. Such structural and organizational sources of employment inequality challenge the prevailing individualistic models of human capital theory, which claim women deliberately choose occupations which do not penalize labor force intermittency (assumed to be associated with marriage and childbearing), and these occupations are low-paying because of crowding (i.e., a surfeit of women need the flexibility of these jobs). Our results suggest that women's labor force turnover may be associated with employers' and unions' inability or unwillingness to acknowledge and deal with women's normal workplace disputes, which happen to be different from men's.

The practical consequences of our findings are straightforward: To improve productivity and efficiency, unions and employers need to acknowledge the emotional aspects of workplaces. The emotional experiences of workers must be heard, contextualized, and affirmed as real. As we have seen, denying workers' feelings de-legitimizes the lived experiences of some workers, particularly women, undermining organizational

productivity and discouraging personal achievement. Our findings do not allow us to assert that a union-negotiated grievance procedure better serves women workers than an open-door policy, or vice versa. But our finding indicate that both firms and workers would be better served by dispute resolution procedures which acknowledge how everyday workplace problems about tasks and interpersonal treatment sometimes become infused with emotion. We suggest that like the "reasonable woman" standard for determining sexual harassment in the United States,(9) the emotional distress of reasonable workers be taken into account in the resolution of workplace disputes.

Implications for Future Research

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, our research was motivated by the failure of statistical studies to account for well-documented employment differentials between women and men. We sought to get into the "black box" of everyday life in organizations by examining one facet, conflict. Sociologists have long documented that conflict is normal, but workplace conflict has not been examined before as a source of employment inequality between women and men. Our study was exploratory and the findings suggest several avenues for future research.

Personality conflicts are shorthand for a constellation of issues about tasks, interpersonal treatment, and negative feelings which accompany them. While workplace disputes about many tasks and about severe inter-personal treatment have standing as disputes in workplace dispute resolution forums, personality conflicts do not. Importantly, women and men defined similar situations differently: what men labeled task disputes, women labeled personality conflicts. Thus, similar disputes are labeled differently by women and men workers, and women are less successful in resolving these workplace conflicts than men. Our evidence suggests that these differences systematically disadvantage women's workplace achievement. More research is needed on a range of organizations and a range of occupations to see if the pattern holds and, if not, the sources of variation and their consequences.

Additional research also is needed on formal dispute resolution procedures and reporting under them. Our research deliberately allowed the entire range of workers' self-reports. If we had relied upon union- and firm-defined dispute categories, we never would have heard about personality conflicts. However, we did not compare official records from unions, firms, and courts with workers' self-reports. We suspect such records are the "tip of the iceberg" and that the institutionalized filtering mechanisms which keep women's dispute reports from appearing in official records also serve to enforce other aspects of employment inequality. Many unions and employers, however, claim increased sensitivity with women workers' needs. For unions, in particular, women are an important source of new members, but the extent to which women's workplace difficulties have been incorporated into union-negotiated grievance procedures as women have moved increasingly into the labor force is not known. Such research would help to establish the validity and reliability of self-reports.

Continued refinement of the conceptual and theoretical model presented in this article will require additional empirical testing. We believe that this avenue of research is

important to balance the prevailing individually-oriented explanations of employment inequality by contributing an organizational and structural perspective.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

4 Despite the title of Pringle's 1989 book, Secretaries talk, the author gives little voice to secretaries' own concerns.

5 To date, most studies of workplace dispute resolution have been institutional or union reports of grievance procedures (e.g., Lewin & Peterson, 1988). This study supplements that work with reports from the workers themselves about how they experience and resolve workplace disputes.

6 All names are pseudonyms and, where appropriate, non-essential details have been altered to disguise interviewees' identities.

7 This supports the findings of Canary, Cunningham and Cody (1987) that male college students were more likely than female students to deny the existence of conflicts.

8 We have considered the idea that men interviewees would have been more comfortable expressing personality conflicts with men interviewers. Contradicting that, however, are our roles as women interviewers: If women's roles are to be nurturing, as stated by role theory, we would have expected men to be more forthcoming with us than with men interviewers.

9 The reasonable woman standard essentially determines whether any reasonable woman would find a particular behavior offensive. Perpetrators are encouraged to ask themselves if they would direct the words or behavior in question to their grandmother.

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