

# The Role of Hierarchy in Face-to-Face and E-Supported Mediations: The Use of an Online Intake to Balance the Influence of Hierarchy

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## Keywords

mediation, power, hierarchy, technology.

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## Abstract

This study investigates the effects of hierarchical differences on mediation satisfaction in e-supported mediations compared to face-to-face mediations. Specifically, we compare face-to-face mediations and mediations in which an online intake is used before the joint face-to-face session (hybrid types of mediation). We assume that the use of an online intake before the joint mediation mitigates the effects of hierarchy on parties' satisfaction with the mediation. To test our hypotheses, we use data from real mediation cases dealing with hierarchical labor conflicts in the Netherlands. In line with our hypothesis, results show that supervisors feel more satisfied with the mediation when involved in a face-to-face mediation, but subordinates and supervisors feel equally satisfied when an online intake is used before the mediation. Implications for mediation theory and practice are discussed.

Organizations are usually characterized by hierarchy, the most common form of social organization (Halevy, Chou, & Galinsky, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Consequently, a substantial part of organizational conflicts can be labeled as hierarchical conflicts (Rahim, 2001). The occupation of a certain hierarchical position is usually tied with an unequal distribution of formal power and asymmetric control over valued resources (Ridgeway, 2001; Van de Vliert, Euwema, & Huisman, 1995) and transforms how people construe and approach the world (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Fitness, 2000; Guinote, 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Whereas the world of subordinates is filled with real and psychological shackles, supervisors feel free to behave as they like (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009). Supervisors are less sensitive for external factors, compared with subordinates, if these factors are not directly instrumental for supervisors to accomplish their goals (Hollander, 1958). Once established, the effects of hierarchy persist through various self-reinforcing psychological and interpersonal mechanisms (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

Such hierarchy effects have also been shown to impact negotiations (e.g., De Dreu & Van Kleef, 2004; Kim, Pinkley, & Fragale, 2005; Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006), conflict (e.g., de Reuver, 2006; Fitness, 2000; Kabanoff, 1991), and mediation (e.g., Bollen, Euwema, & Müller, 2010; Bollen, Ittner, & Euwema, 2012). For example, Bollen et al. (2010, 2012) indicate that hierarchy affects parties' perceptions and evaluations of mediation in labor conflicts, with subordinates perceiving the mediation significantly more negative than supervisors. As mediation aims for a win-win solution that satisfies parties to a similar extent, the appropriateness of mediation for hierarchical labor conflicts can be questioned (see Agusti-Panareda, 2004; Gewurz, 2001). In this article, we identify a form of mediation—

e-supported mediation—that can potentially alleviate these asymmetrical effects of hierarchical differences on mediation satisfaction.

Nowadays, more and more mediation service providers offer e-supported mediation as a potential alternative to traditional face-to-face mediations. E-supported mediation refers to mediations that are fully e-supported as well as mediations that are partly computerized and partly face-to-face (hybrid mediations). In this article, we focus on the latter type of e-supported mediations where disputants fill out an online intake before the face-to-face session, of which the answers are only shared with the mediator. Although e-supported mediations are increasingly used, research has hardly investigated the effects of e-supported mediation on the mediation process and its outcomes. The aim of the current article is to investigate how hierarchical differences between supervisors and subordinates are affected by the use of e-supported mediation.

We hypothesize that the use of an online intake may level hierarchical differences between supervisors and subordinates in mediation satisfaction (Bollen et al., 2010, 2012). E-supported mediation offers parties the space and time to reflect on the situation, to formulate opinions in a safe environment, or to develop potential solutions. This may be particularly beneficial for subordinates, who normally feel uncertain about the mediation and refrain from expressing their emotions or opinions freely when supervisors are present (Bollen et al., 2010; McKenna & Bargh, 1999). The use of an online intake can help subordinates to prepare for the subsequent face-to-face mediation and foster feelings of control while reducing uncertainty. For supervisors, the use of such a tool can be an efficient way to share information with the mediator: He or she can fill out the intake whenever suitable without losing time traveling. At the same time, however, it may also restrict the power supervisors normally exert face-to-face, which may contribute to feelings of uncertainty and have negative effects on their perceptions or evaluation of the mediation. To test this, we analyze data from 60 real hierarchical labor conflicts that were mediated entirely face-to-face (only joint sessions) or that included an online intake before face-to-face mediation (e-supported mediation).

## Hierarchy and Power in Mediation

By definition, parties in a hierarchical relationship differ in their positional power. Such positional power is often related to other power sources such as control over valued resources (e.g., money, expertise, or information; Emerson, 1964; Fiol, O'Connor, & Aguinis, 2001; Fitness, 2000; Guinote, 2007; Keltner et al., 2003; Ridgeway, 2001). In general, subordinates have fewer resources at their disposal than supervisors and are dependent upon their supervisor to obtain rewards (valued resources) or avoid punishments (Emerson, 1964; Ridgeway, 2001). Their position is associated with constraints, vulnerability, uncertainty, and dependency (Guinote, 2007).

The occupation of a certain hierarchical position has metamorphic consequences, leading supervisors and subordinates to roam in very different psychological spaces and to approach the world differently (Kipnis, Castell, Gergen, & Mauch, 1976; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Magee, Gruenfeld, Keltner, & Galinsky, 2005). High-power individuals possess a dominant approach response, experiencing little interference from others (Keltner et al., 2003). Possessing power is often equated with freedom and leads to action and goal-directed behavior (Keltner et al., 2003). Similarly, those with greater power are more likely to express their private opinions, emotions, and attitudes (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). In addition, it facilitates independent thinking and reduces the awareness of the individuating features of the other, resulting in hindered perspective-taking. As a consequence, high-power individuals are often unfazed by the emotions expressed by the other or their persuasion attempts (Briñol et al., 2007; Galinsky et al., 2008), unless they possess characteristics or information that would be instrumental to accomplish the power-holder goals (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Overbeck & Park, 2006; Van Kleef et al., 2006). In contrast, the world of low-power individuals is filled with

obstacles. This is also reflected by the reticent stance of subordinates. Low-power individuals often feel inhibited, leading to risk aversion and a heightened vigilance (Keltner et al., 2003). This implies that, compared to supervisors, subordinates pay more attention to details, are more responsive to the environment, and are easily influenced by more subtle messages or attempts of persuasion (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Fitness, 2000; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Keltner et al., 2003). This explains why subordinates often experience conflicts more personally than supervisors (Fitness, 2000).

These hierarchical differences have been shown to persist over time through various self-reinforcing psychological and interpersonal mechanisms that are difficult to remove. Individuals whose behavior deviates from such prescriptive expectations are often evaluated negatively and are punished, also known as backlash against individuals who act *out of place* (Rudman, 1998). Arguably more important reasons for hierarchy maintenance are high-power individual's immunity to external pressures and people's psychological tendency to rationalize the status-quo social structure, which is described in detail by the system justification theory (Jost et al., 2004). Because of the functions hierarchy provides, there is a need—even among those disadvantaged by hierarchy—to see hierarchy as good, fair, desirable, and inevitably an appropriate form of social organization (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Jost et al., 2004).

These self-sustaining effects of hierarchy are also reflected in research on negotiation and conflict management. Consider, for example, research showing that in conflict, supervisors tend to force or confront (approach), while subordinates are likely to withdraw (inhibition) (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Fitness, 2000; Van de Vliert et al., 1995). This may have important implications for subordinates' abilities to resolve conflicts in a satisfactory way for themselves. Indeed, recent research on subordinates' and supervisors' perceptions of mediation shows that, even in mediation, the effects of hierarchy are persistent and difficult to remove (Jost et al., 2004; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Although mediators generally try to reach a power balance and to foster a win-win agreement that satisfies both parties to an equal extent (Kressel, 2006; Wall & Lynn, 1993), supervisors feel more satisfied with the mediation and perceive the mediation as more effective than subordinates (Bollen et al., 2010, 2012). We propose here that an important tool to potentially minimize the impact of hierarchical differences on mediation satisfaction is e-supported mediation.

## E-Supported Mediation: The Use of an Online Intake

In recent years, e-supported mediation has proliferated as a dispute resolution method to settle interpersonal employee conflicts (Raines, 2005; Turel, Yuan, & Rose, 2007). Similar to face-to-face mediations, a third party helps conflicting parties to discuss their issues and to understand each other. The mediator has no power to prescribe agreements or outcomes (Kressel & Pruitt, 1989; Wall, Stark, & Standifer, 2001), but rather helps parties to determine which solution is best for them (Goldman, Cropanzano, Stein, & Benson, 2008). In doing so, the mediator uses techniques that alter parties' perceptions and communications to manage the power imbalance, with the goal of establishing a power balance (Wall & Lynn, 1993).

Although e-supported mediation also refers to fully e-supported mediations, we focus in this article on mediations in which an online intake tool is used as an add-on to the traditional face-to-face mediation. More specifically, parties are invited to fill out an online survey before participating in a joint face-to-face mediation session. The online intake encourages both parties to reflect on the issue at hand, the accompanying feelings, the underlying interests as well as potential solutions. Such online forms also provide parties with an opportunity to tell their side of the story via asynchronous typewritten messages (e-mails); it helps parties to get some insight into the situation at hand, and their needs and interests as well as the needs and interests of the other.

## The Use of an Online Intake in Hierarchical Labor Conflicts

In general, powerful people or supervisors feel more certain than low-power people or subordinates because of their higher degrees of control (Fiske & Depret, 1996). This is reflected in the assertive behavior of supervisors who do not refrain from speaking up (Fitness, 2000; Keltner et al., 2003) and the slouched protective stance of subordinates who often experience difficulties to express themselves freely in a face-to-face setting (Fitness, 2000; McKenna & Bargh, 1999). Although subordinates are typically more affected by conflict and experience stronger emotions than supervisors (Fitness, 2000; Galinsky et al., 2003), they are easily silenced by a look or a remark of the supervisor.

Research on hierarchical face-to-face mediations shows that subordinates feel more uncertain about the mediation than supervisors (Bollen et al., 2010). A first explanation for this finding refers to the fact that the position of subordinates is associated with constraints, vulnerability, uncertainty, and dependency (Guinote, 2007). Another explanation, more related to the mediation context, refers to the fact that the mediation setting may be more familiar to supervisors than for subordinates. Whereas mediation represents for supervisors a standard procedure in which they participate whenever a (serious) conflict arises, it may represent for subordinates a new (unknown) situation giving rise to feelings of uncertainty. A third reason is related to the potential consequences of the mediation. Whereas for subordinates mediation may represent the prospect of job loss, social participation, or recognition (Jahoda, 1982), this is less true for supervisors. These feelings of uncertainty by the subordinates have been shown by Bollen et al. (2010) to produce a detrimental effect on their satisfaction with the mediation process.

One way for the mediator to reduce feelings of uncertainty is to provide parties with information or control over the process (McGraw, Hasecke, & Conger, 2003; Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999). Since an online intake aids in the preparation of both parties for the subsequent face-to-face mediation, it may lower feelings of uncertainty about the mediation. The space and time provided by the questions in the intake may help parties to reflect on the current situation as well as the interests involved and potential solutions. When something is unclear or parties feel uncertain, they can ask for the help of the mediator. They can do this by sending an e-mail to the mediator, while vocal (e.g., phone) or visual channels (e.g., webcam) are absent. Subsequently, the mediator can inform the parties about the mediation, the goals, or their role. In addition to providing both parties with a safe space to express their opinions without interruptions or pressure of the other party waiting for a response (Raines, 2006), the questions in the intake help parties to prepare for the upcoming mediation and reduce feelings of uncertainty as well as foster feelings of safety or control by allowing each party to have the freedom to choose when and where they complete the questions and reflect upon them (e.g., at home in pajamas or on the couch). Ultimately, this helps both parties speak more openly about the conflict during the subsequent face-to-face mediation.

For subordinates, who usually experience more uncertainty than supervisors, this way of working may enhance feelings of control and confidence (Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999) and reduce feelings of uncertainty about the mediation (McGraw et al., 2003), which may promote subordinates' mediation satisfaction (Bollen et al., 2010). For supervisors, who are used to calling the shots and to exercising influence by their presence, the online intake may represent an obstacle. More specifically, supervisors may feel restrained or uncertain by the use of an online intake, as their influence is temporally restricted and less visible to the subordinate, resulting in the relinquishing of their control to the mediator.

In contrast to face-to-face mediations where subordinates feel more uncertain and less satisfied with the mediation than supervisors, we expect that the use of an online intake eliminates the omnipresent effects of hierarchy. More specifically, we assume that the use of an online intake results in equal levels of satisfaction for subordinates and supervisors by promoting subordinates' perceptions of the mediation and stultify the ones of supervisors. To summarize, we propose that the relation between hierarchical position and satisfaction with the mediation is moderated by the mediation type used (face-to-face vs. an online intake), such that hierarchical differences will exercise less influence on parties' satisfaction with

the mediation in e-supported compared to face-to-face mediation. If this would be the case, e-supported mediation contributes to the aim of mediation: to balance power in order to achieve a win-win solution that is equally satisfying to both parties.

To test the hypothesis stated above, this article explores and contrasts the effects of both face-to-face and e-supported mediation on parties' satisfaction with the mediation. Specifically, we assume that the use of an online intake levels the effects of hierarchy on parties' satisfaction with the mediation. With the help of exploratory analyses, we investigate whether this balancing effect can be explained by the level of uncertainty experienced by the parties: Whereas the use of an online intake may decrease subordinates' feelings of uncertainty, it may increase supervisors' feelings of uncertainty.

## Method

### Procedure and Sample

Thanks to close cooperation with two mediation providers in the Netherlands, we conducted a survey in 2011 among former mediation clients who were involved in a hierarchical labor conflict. Similarities between the two mediation providers are reflected by the fact that both (a) handle similar cases, (b) aim for the same clients, and (c) use the same software to support the online intake. The two companies merged in 2012.

When parties are involved in a face-to-face mediation, all sessions take place face-to-face. All parties are jointly present at the same time. When parties participate in an e-supported mediation, they need to fill out an online intake before the joint mediation takes place. Asynchronous, typewritten messages are used to answer the intake questions and are only shared with the mediator, not with the other party. Examples of the questions include "Give a description of the situation." "How do you feel about this situation?" "What could be of interest to the other party?" Once the intake is finalized, appointments are made for the face-to-face mediation. As soon as parties finish their mediation, they receive an e-mail inviting parties to participate in the study. Participation is voluntary and confidential.

To collect the data for this study, we selected, between February 2011 and June 2011, the first 30 face-to-face mediations that were finalized dealing with a hierarchical labor conflict, resulting in 60 participants. The same procedure was used for the e-supported mediations. One hundred and twenty participants were included in this study.

Fifty-nine percent of the respondents returned the questionnaire, of which 33 were supervisors (15 face-to-face; 18 e-supported) and 38 were subordinates (17 face-to-face; 21 e-supported). On average, respondents were 46 years old ( $SD = 8.95$ ). Forty men (18 face-to-face; 22 e-supported) and 31 women participated in the study (14 face-to-face; 17 e-supported). Data show that conflicts tended to be highly escalated with an average escalation level of 3.73 ( $SD = 1.40$ ) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, reflecting a very high level of escalation. There was no difference with respect to the escalation level of the labor conflicts that were mediated face-to-face versus e-supported ( $F[1, 69] = 0.85, p = ns$ ).

### Measures

#### *Mediation Type*

Parties could be involved in (a) a traditional face-to-face mediation or (b) a mediation in which an online intake is used before the joint face-to-face mediation.

#### *Settlement: Success Ratio of Signed Agreements*

To assess the amount of agreements reached, participants were invited to indicate whether (a) they reached an agreement (b) or not.

### ***Hierarchical Position***

In this study, hierarchical position is operationalized as the occupation of a position of authority or a certain formal position in relation to the other party (item: “What is your relation to the other party involved in the mediation?”; Finkelstein, 1992). The conflict relation was described either as a conflict between supervisor and subordinate (in large organizations) or employer and employee (in small organizations), supervisors and employers were coded as two and subordinates and employees as one.

### ***Satisfaction with the Mediation***

The quality of the mediation was assessed through a measure of each party’s satisfaction with the mediation (Poitras & Le Tareau, 2009). Reason to do so is that satisfaction relates to parties’ attitude toward mediation, whether parties comply with the agreement, and possibly to their well-being (Poitras & Le Tareau, 2009). Furthermore, given that disputants often seek relief that is not solely monetary or outcome oriented, it is likely that there is a discrepancy between objective (agreements) and subjective (parties’ perceptions) mediation outcomes: Reaching an agreement does not preclude feeling unsatisfied, or vice versa; parties may feel satisfied even when no settlement has been reached.

Satisfaction with the mediation is assessed by means of a 6-item scale indexing the extent to which participants feel satisfied with the mediation outcome (three items; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .95$ ; McGillicuddy, Pruitt, Welton, Zubek, & Peirce, 1991; Poitras & Le Tareau, 2009) and the mediation process (three items; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .72$ ; Wissler, 2002). Answers were given on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, a higher score indicating a higher level of satisfaction. Satisfaction with the mediation outcome and satisfaction with process often interact ( $r = .53$ ;  $p < .001$ ) to form an overall level of satisfaction (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .88$ ). In the remainder of this article, we run analyses both for the overall scale for satisfaction (satisfaction with the mediation) and the two specific scales: Satisfaction with the outcome and satisfaction with the process.

## **Analyses**

Data management and analyses were executed using SPSS 19.0. To test our hypotheses, MANOVA was used. Age (in years) and sex (1 = *male*, 2 = *female*) were initially incorporated as control variables in the analyses. By including these variables in the model, the intent was to determine the incremental contribution that hierarchical position, the mediation type used, and their interaction make to the prediction of satisfaction with the mediation (process and outcome) after the effects of these control variables have been taken into account. Following the recommendations by Becker (2005), Carlson and Wu (2012), and Spector and Brannick (2011), we ran analyses with and without control variables. As we obtained the same results with and without control variables, we only report the results without control variables.

## **Results**

### **Settlement**

In 65% of the cases participants reached an agreement. Twenty-five percent did not reach an agreement. Logistic regression analysis shows that with respect to the amount of agreements reached, there is no difference between the face-to-face and e-supported mediations ( $p = ns$ ). Specifically, in face-to-face mediations, 66% of the parties reached an agreement. These settlement rates are in line with other research indicating that the average settlement rates of face-to-face mediations in the Netherlands range between 55% and 60% (Guiaux & Tumewu, 2008). In the e-supported mediations, 64% reached an agreement.

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows mean scores, standard deviations, and correlations among the research variables.

To test our hypothesis whether the mediation type used (face-to-face vs. e-supported) moderates the relationship between hierarchical position and satisfaction with the mediation, we conducted a MANOVA in which satisfaction with the mediation, satisfaction with the mediation outcome, and satisfaction with the mediation process are predicted by the two main effect terms: hierarchical position and the mediation type used. Whereas hierarchical position is positively related to satisfaction with the mediation ( $F[1, 67] = 5.53, p \leq .05$ ), with supervisors feeling more satisfied with the mediation than subordinates, mediation type is not related to satisfaction with the mediation ( $F[1, 67] = 0.001, ns$ ). Additionally, and in line with our assumptions, we find a significant interaction effect of hierarchical position and the mediation type used on satisfaction with the mediation ( $F[1, 67] = 12.55, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that the relation between hierarchical position and satisfaction with the mediation depends on the type of mediation used. Similar results are observed for satisfaction with the mediation outcome ( $F[1, 67] = 16.09, p \leq .001$ ) and satisfaction with the mediation process ( $F[1, 67] = 4.47, p \leq .05$ ).

To visualize the interaction effect, hierarchical position was cross-tabulated with the mediation type used (face-to-face vs. the use of an online tool) and the average score of satisfaction with the mediation.

Table 1  
Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and Intercorrelations of Research Variables

	M	SD	2	3	4	5
1. Hierarchical position			-.01	.23 <sup>+</sup>	.27 <sup>*</sup>	.13
2. Mediation Type				.04	.03	.05
Subordinates				.45 <sup>**</sup>	.47 <sup>**</sup>	.28 <sup>+</sup>
Supervisors				-.35 <sup>*</sup>	-.41 <sup>*</sup>	-.22
3. Satisfaction with mediation	3.17	1.07				
Face-to-face	3.13	1.01			.89 <sup>***</sup>	.83 <sup>***</sup>
Subordinates	2.41	0.86				
Supervisors	3.87	0.56				
Use of online intake	3.21	1.13	-.		.95 <sup>***</sup>	.90 <sup>***</sup>
Subordinates	3.33	0.89				
Supervisors	3.07	1.37				
4. Satisfaction with mediation outcome	3.01	1.36				
Face-to-face	2.97	1.30				.48 <sup>**</sup>
Subordinates	1.94	0.89				
Supervisors	4.02	0.67				
Use of online intake	3.04	1.42				.73 <sup>***</sup>
Subordinates	3.19	1.20				
Supervisors	2.87	1.65				
5. Satisfaction with mediation process	3.34	1.02				
Face-to-face	3.28	1.04	-.			
Subordinates	2.90	1.20				
Supervisors	3.71	0.71				
Use of online intake	3.38	1.00	-.			
Subordinates	3.48	0.84				
Supervisors	3.28	1.18				

Note. <sup>+</sup> $p \leq .10$ . <sup>\*</sup> $p \leq .05$ . <sup>\*\*</sup> $p \leq .01$ . <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p \leq .001$ .

Figure 1 illustrates the interaction effect of hierarchical position and the mediation type used on satisfaction with the mediation.

Figure 1 shows that in face-to-face mediations, subordinates and supervisors differ significantly regarding their satisfaction with the mediation ( $F[1, 30] = 28.73, p \leq .001$ ) with subordinates feeling less satisfied with the mediation than supervisors (subordinates:  $M = 2.41, SD = 0.86$ ; supervisors:  $M = 3.87, SD = 0.56$ ). However, when an online intake is used to prepare the face-to-face mediation, subordinates and supervisors feel equally satisfied with the mediation ( $F[1, 37] = 0.51, ns$ ). The same pattern is observed for satisfaction with the mediation outcome and satisfaction with the mediation process: When involved in a face-to-face mediation, subordinates feel less satisfied with the mediation outcome ( $F[1, 30] = 44.72, p \leq .001$ ; subordinates:  $M = 1.94, SD = 0.89$ ; supervisors:  $M = 4.02, SD = 0.67$ ) and the mediation process ( $F[1, 30] = 5.48, p \leq .05$ ; subordinates:  $M = 2.90, SD = 1.20$ ; supervisors:  $M = 3.71, SD = 0.71$ ). This does not hold when an online intake is used to prepare the face-to-face mediation: Subordinates do not differ from supervisors in their satisfaction with the mediation outcome ( $F[1, 37] = 0.49, ns$ ) nor the mediation process ( $F[1, 37] = 0.37, p = ns$ ). The use of an online intake thus mitigates the influence of hierarchy on parties' satisfaction in face-to-face mediations. Furthermore, Figure 1 suggests that by the use of an online intake, subordinates' satisfaction with the mediation is affected in a positive way ( $F[1, 36] = 9.93, p \leq .01$ ; face-to-face:  $M = 2.42, SD = 0.86$ ; e-supported:  $M = 3.33, SD = 0.89$ ), while supervisors' satisfaction is influenced in a negative way ( $F[1, 32] = 4.39, p \leq .05$ ; face-to-face:  $M = 3.87, SD = 0.56$ ; e-supported:  $M = 3.07, SD = 1.37$ ). The same significant pattern is observed for satisfaction with the outcome: For subordinates ( $F[1, 36] = 12.18, p \leq .001$ ; face-to-face:  $M = 1.94, SD = 0.89$ ; e-supported:  $M = 3.19, SD = 1.20$ ) and for supervisors ( $F[1, 32] = 6.37, p \leq .05$ ; face-to-face:  $M = 4.02, SD = 0.67$ ; e-supported:  $M = 2.87, SD = 1.65$ ). However, it is not observed for satisfaction with the mediation process: subordinates ( $F[1, 36] = 3.01, p \leq .10$ ) and supervisors ( $F[1, 32] = 1.54, p = ns$ ).

**Exploratory Results Section**

To assess how feelings of uncertainty relate to our results, we tested to what extent subordinates and supervisors experience uncertainty about the mediation in face-to-face compared to e-supported

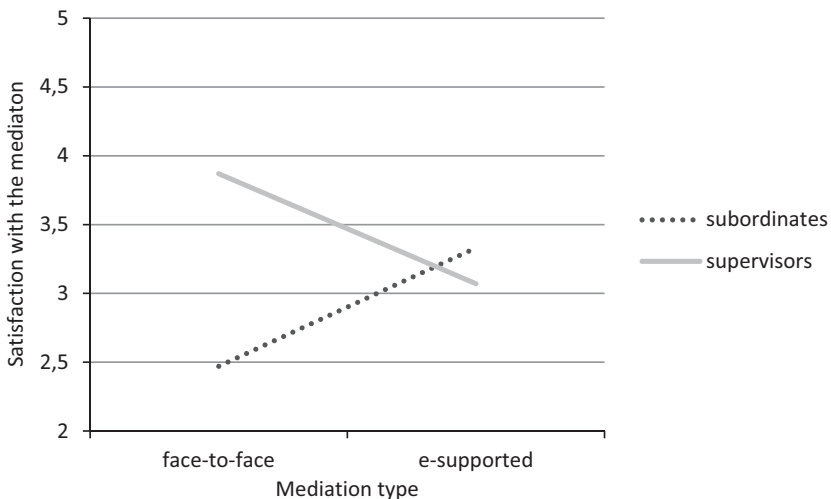


Figure 1. The interactive effects of hierarchical position (subordinates vs. supervisors) and mediation type (face-to-face vs. e-supported) on satisfaction with the mediation.



mediations. To measure uncertainty, we used the three items mentioned by Bollen et al. (2010) assessing the level of uncertainty about the mediations process, the mediator, and the other party. Answers were given on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Data show that in face-to-face mediations, subordinates feel significantly more uncertain about the mediation (subordinates:  $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) than supervisors (supervisors:  $M = 1.60$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) ( $F[1, 29] = 11.61$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ). When an online intake is used, subordinates and supervisors feel equally uncertain about the mediation ( $F[1, 37] = 0.78$ ,  $p = ns$ ) (subordinates:  $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.16$  and supervisors:  $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). Compared to face-to-face mediations, supervisors' uncertainty is significantly increased ( $F[1, 32] = 4.36$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ), while subordinates' feelings of uncertainty are not significantly affected ( $F[1, 36] = 0.604$ ,  $p = ns$ ).

## Discussion

The main contribution of this study is to illustrate that the use of an online intake before face-to-face mediations can mitigate the persistent effects of hierarchy in face-to-face mediations. Our study contributes to research on hierarchy by showing that the influence of hierarchy is not omnipresent nor everlasting (Jost et al., 2004) and can be eliminated in certain circumstances. As such, the use of an online intake represents a viable way to mediate hierarchical labor conflicts since it helps to reach the aim of mediation: Reaching a power balance and finding a solution that satisfies both parties to an equal extent (win-win solution), something that is very difficult to obtain (Wall & Lynn, 1993).

In search for potential explanations for this balancing effect, we observe that, compared to face-to-face mediations, subordinates' satisfaction is increased by the use of an online intake, while supervisors' satisfaction is impaired. Possibly this effect can be explained by the amount of uncertainty that is evoked in subordinates and supervisors when an online intake is used. Exploratory analyses show that (a) in face-to-face mediations, subordinates feel more uncertain than supervisors, and (b) supervisors and subordinates feel equally uncertain when an online intake is used. Given that uncertainty about the mediation is negatively related to satisfaction with the mediation (Bollen et al., 2010), uncertainty may explain the different effects of the online tool on parties' satisfaction with the mediation.

More detailed analyses show, however, that next to uncertainty, other factors play a role affecting parties' satisfaction with the mediation. Although we assumed that the use of an online intake would decrease subordinates' feelings of uncertainty and increase supervisors' feelings of uncertainty, data show that only supervisors' feelings of uncertainty are affected.

Since people confronted with uncertainty usually feel anxious about the ability to control their immediate environment (Hogg, 2000; Hogg & Mullin, 1999; Lopes, 1987), it would be interesting for future research to investigate whether and how the use of an online intake tool is related to feelings of power or control. Possibly the use of an online intake adds to subordinates' feelings of power or control, while it hinders or deteriorates supervisors' normal (face-to-face) feelings of power. More specifically, we assume that for subordinates, that the questions in the intake help them to reflect on the situation and to prepare for the subsequent mediation. This, together with the opportunity to fill out the intake in a safe place, without interruptions or nonverbal signals of the other, may add to their feelings of power. Supervisors, however, may feel restrained by the use of an online intake since the use of such a tool makes it more difficult to influence the other directly. Consequently, supervisors may perceive the intake as a threat to their power. In this context, it is interesting to know that we learned from the mediation service providers that many supervisors asked whether they could skip filling out the intake or whether the online intake was also obligatory for them, assuming that the intake would be mainly directed to subordinates.

In our study, we ran analyses for satisfaction with the mediation while differentiating between satisfaction with the mediation outcome and the mediation process. Our data seem to suggest that the use of an online intake questionnaire especially affects features that relate more to satisfaction with the mediation outcome and less with the process: While subordinates' and supervisors' satisfaction with the mediation

outcome is affected by the use of an intake, their satisfaction with the mediation process is not. As such, changes in parties' overall satisfaction with the mediation can be mainly explained through changes in satisfaction with the mediation outcome. For future research, it would be interesting to integrate measures that relate to satisfaction with the mediation process such as procedural justice and the expression of emotions or voice, including the opportunity to present opinions relevant to decisions even when they do not directly influence a decision (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). It is possible that for subordinates, the use of an online intake fosters their belief that they are listened to and able to influence (at least partly) the mediation process and its outcome, which contributes to their satisfaction with the mediation. It is also possible that the use of an online intake contributes to subordinates' satisfaction with the outcome, as their final outcome reflects better their interests than when outcomes are reached in a face-to-face mediation. As it is often difficult for subordinates to formulate their own wishes in a joint session, the intake may offer them the time and (safe) space to think about the situation and the interests involved. This preparation may imply that the final agreement contains more aspects that really matter and may explain why subordinates' satisfaction with the mediation outcome is positively affected by the use of an online intake. Supervisors, in contrast, may feel less satisfied with the mediation outcome, as the use of an intake may limit the power they normally (in a face-to-face context) exercise on the final resolution.

### Practical Implications

Our data show that one particular type of e-supported mediation (the use of an online intake) can balance the differences between subordinates' and supervisors' satisfaction—the aim of mediation. It is important to note that although supervisors as well as subordinates feel satisfied when an online intake is used, the balancing effect is caused by an increase in subordinates' satisfaction and a decrease in supervisors' satisfaction. This drop in satisfaction may be especially problematic for those supervisors who have been involved in a face-to-face mediation in the past and may cause refusal from their side to comply with the agreement and thus result in less stable agreements. In the long term, this may also imply a drop in parties' satisfaction with the mediation and especially satisfaction with the mediation outcome. More research is needed to investigate these long-term effects.

Second, when working with an online intake, mediators need to make sure they do not become too solution focused. Although emotions may be less visible in an online context, mediators still need to address them and to work with them. This is especially important when mediators consider the use of fully e-supported mediations. In this case, it is also important that mediators learn how to transfer their traditional mediation skills to the online platform.

Finally, mediators should not approach conflict in a *one size fits all* fashion. A good mediator knows the pros and the cons of different mediation types. A helpful indicator could be that asynchronous communication is recommended when people need to work without being disturbed (consult, analyze, and integrate information), while direct interactions are most fruitful when people need to reach common understanding (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008). Nevertheless, choosing the best format for a mediation requires careful attention to the specific details of each unique conflict situation.

### Uniqueness and Limitations

The current study adds to earlier mediation research in several ways. First, our data show that by the use of an online tool the effects of hierarchy can be mitigated. Second, by going beyond experimental laboratory settings (in which role-playing techniques are used to manipulate power) and research that is mainly descriptive in nature, this study investigates real hierarchical conflicts that are mediated by professional mediators, where parties have control over real outcomes—conditions that are impossible to establish in an experimental setting. This approach provided us with the possibility to study high impact situations

(Lerner, 2003) in which parties feel emotionally as well as cognitively involved. Finally, this study presents a valuable alternative to the general tendency to use binary agreement–no-agreement measures when studying mediations (Lipsky, Seeber, & Fincher, 2003) by focusing on objective as well as subjective measures that reflect the mediation quality. After all, it is the way parties perceive the mediation that will affect their current behaviors, feelings, and thoughts, and those of the future (e.g., whether they will comply with the mediation agreement or not; Poitras & Le Tareau, 2009).

There are also some limitations inherent to this study that simultaneously suggest interesting directions for future inquiry. First, we are not able to distinguish hierarchical position from status or power in this data set. Although hierarchy often coincides with power and control over valued resources (Emerson, 1964; Fiol et al., 2001), power is also a psychological state that can have effects beyond the effects of hierarchical position (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012; Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012). As such, power does not always coincide with hierarchy. More specifically, the one formally lower in hierarchy may feel more powerful than the one who is in a nominally higher position because of access to certain information (Kim et al., 2005). For example, when a subordinate is responsible for critical and nonsubstitutable core procedures in the organizations, he or she can exercise considerable power on his or her supervisor as the performance of the latter depends on the successful completion of various procedures by the subordinate (Kotter, 1977). Future research is needed to contrast the effects of hierarchy, power, and status.

Second, while the real-world ecological validity of our sample offers important contributions, it also carries certain limitations and restrictions. This study only reports the effects of mediations that are held fully face-to-face and mediations that in an initial phase are supported by an online tool. Future research could also investigate mediations that are conducted online entirely, compared to e-supported mediations as we examine here. Additionally, our findings are limited by the fact that not all disputants were willing to share their experience. For example, the ones who evaluated their case as too sensitive or painful may have renounced participation in the survey. On the other hand, it is also possible that some of them used the survey to vent their frustrations. While we believe we were able to obtain a representative sample, the possibility of a response bias does exist. Lastly, our sample is also limited in size and by the cultural context of the Netherlands. Given that the role and strength of hierarchy differs from country to country (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Zhong, Magee, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2006), replication in different contexts and societies is needed to check whether a similar balancing effect can be observed in countries that are less egalitarian than the Netherlands. If an online intake is able to counter the impulsive expression of emotions and thoughts, the use of such a tool may be especially beneficial for East Asians as it safeguards values of respect (Adam, Shirako, & Maddux, 2010).

## Conclusion

The strength of the current research is that it demonstrates the use of an online intake before mediation can counter the far-reaching effects of hierarchy. In contrast to face-to-face mediations where hierarchy affects parties' perceptions of the mediation, parties feel equally satisfied with the mediation when an online intake is used. This contributes to the aim of mediation—to balance power in order to obtain a win–win solution for both parties.

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