

Perceived autonomy support at work and romantic relationship conflict: The mediating role of controlling behavior

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Abstract

This study examined whether controlling behavior mediates the relationship between perceived autonomy support at work and romantic relationship conflict, based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the spillover–crossover model. Using a quantitative correlational design, WCQ, CBS-R, and RPCS scales were employed on 223 employed adults (111 males, 112 females; 18–45 years) in committed relationships. Perceived autonomy support was significantly negatively correlated with controlling behavior ($\rho = -.534, p < .001$) and relationship conflict ($\rho = -.288, p < .01$). Regression showed that autonomy support predicted controlling behavior ($R^2 = .247$) and conflict ($R^2 = .061$), and controlling behavior predicted conflict ($R^2 = .131$). Mediation analysis indicated a significant indirect effect ($-1.44, 95\% \text{ CI } [-2.02, -0.89]$), with the direct effect becoming non-significant, demonstrating full mediation. No gender differences were found. Lower autonomy support at work was linked to greater controlling behavior, which increased relationship conflict, highlighting workplace autonomy support as an indirect protective factor for relationship quality.

Keywords: Controlling Behavior; Perceived Autonomy Support; Romantic Relationship Conflict; Self-Determination Theory

1. Introduction

This study examines how perceived autonomy support at work relates to controlling behavior in romantic relationships and relationship conflict, testing whether controlling behavior mediates the link between workplace autonomy support and conflict. Modern work environments drain self-regulatory resources and blur professional-personal boundaries, affecting home life [24],[25]. Autonomy-supportive leadership, where supervisors offer choice and minimize pressure, strongly predicts employee well-being, but whether these benefits extend to personal relationships remains understudied [2].

Work-life spillover is widespread: 77% of employees report burnout, and 49% say work harms their family relationships [3]. In India, employees average 48 hours weekly, with 66% feeling overworked [4]. While negative work stress spills into home life, positive resources like autonomy support can improve personal relationships through better emotional regulation [5],[24]. Conversely, controlling work environments lead to poor coping and self-regulation, which can manifest as controlling behavior toward partners, monitoring, coercing, or restricting their freedom, increasing conflict and relationship breakdown [1],[9].

Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study draws on the three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness [10], [13]. When autonomy is frustrated at work, individuals may seek compensatory control in their romantic relationships, undermining their partner's needs and fueling conflict [8].

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The study investigates whether controlling behaviour mediates the relationship between perceived workplace autonomy support and romantic relationship conflict, while also exploring gender differences across all three variables.

For the purpose of this study, perceived autonomy support at work refers to the employee's perception that their managers or organisational context provides them with freedom, autonomy, and support for self-direction in performing their tasks [1],[2]. Controlling behaviour in romantic relationships is defined as attempts to restrict or dominate a partner's autonomy through actions like surveillance, coercion, and psychological pressure, and is operationalised here as the mediating variable between perceived autonomy support at work and romantic relationship conflict [8]. Romantic relationship conflict refers to the level of disagreement, tension, or conflict felt between romantic partners, covering both frequency and intensity of conflict in terms of its effect on relationship satisfaction and stability [9],[8].

This study bridges workplace and relationship research, offering both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends Self-Determination Theory into an inter-domain context, showing how autonomy frustration at work can spill over into controlling behaviour and relationship conflict [1], [12]. It also enriches work-life spillover literature by linking positive work factors to relational outcomes [24].

Practically, organisations can use these findings to build autonomy-supportive environments that benefit not just productivity but employees' personal relationships. Couples therapists can similarly incorporate workplace autonomy experiences into their assessments and treatment planning.

1.1. Hypotheses

- H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between perceived autonomy support at work and controlling behavior.
- H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between controlling behavior and romantic relationship conflict.
- H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between perceived autonomy support at work and romantic relationship conflict.
- H₀₄: Perceived autonomy support at work does not significantly predict controlling behavior.
- H₀₅: Perceived autonomy support at work does not significantly predict romantic relationship conflict.
- H₀₆: Controlling behavior does not significantly predict romantic relationship conflict.
- H₀₇: Controlling behavior does not mediate the relationship between perceived autonomy support at work and romantic relationship conflict.
- H₀₈: There are no significant gender differences in perceived autonomy support at work, controlling behavior, or romantic relationship conflict.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research study followed a quantitative design with correlational method.

2.2. Participants

The sample comprised 223 employed adults (112 men and 111 women), between 18 to 45 years old (41.9% were aged between 18 to 27 years; 36.4% were aged between 28 to 36 years; while 21.7% were aged between 37 to 45 years) who were in committed romantic relationships (either dating, living together, or marriage), lasting at least six months. All participants had been fully or partially employed either in the public, private, or non-governmental sectors for at least six months continuously.

2.3. Instruments

Perceived Autonomy support was measured with the Work Climate Questionnaire (WCQ; Deci et al., 1989) comprising 15 items with responses ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). This is a highly internally consistent instrument (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$). Controlling behavior was measured using the Controlling Behaviour Scale-Revised (CBS-R; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005) consisting of 24 items distributed over five subscales namely economic, threatening, intimidating, emotional, and isolating control. The CBS-R had a response scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). The scale was highly internally consistent ($\alpha > .80$). Relationship conflict within romantic relationships was measured using the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS; Zacchilli et al., 2009) consisting of 39 items grouped into six subscales namely compromise, domination, submission, separation, avoidance, and interactional reactivity.

2.4. Procedure and Analysis

Data were collected via a Google form. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Results from the Shapiro-Wilk test showed that all three variables were not normally distributed; hence, the use of Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was necessary. Linear regression models were used to determine the paths of prediction. The effect of mediation was assessed using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) using SPSS. An independent samples t-test was employed to test the gender difference.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Before any data was collected, informed consent was obtained, and participants had the right to stop at any time without any fees being charged. All information was stored properly to prevent unauthorized access. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The research was conducted in a way that ensured that participants did not experience any discomfort or distress. In case of need, information will be provided to support this. Finally, in order to maintain integrity in the research, information was reported honestly and responsibly without any form of exaggeration or misrepresentation.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Normality

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the sample (N = 223). Gender was coded as a binary variable where 1 = male and 2 = female. The sample was approximately equal in gender distribution, comprising 112 males (50.2%) and 111 females (49.8%). The overall mean was 1.50 (SD = 0.50), with scores ranging from 1 to 2. The near-zero skewness value (skewness = -0.009, SE = 0.163) indicated an approximately symmetrical distribution; however, the kurtosis value (-2.018, SE = 0.324) suggested a platykurtic distribution, denoting a flatter-than-normal spread of scores.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Gender

Variable	Category	N	Percent	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE
Gender	Male	112	50.2								
	Female	111	49.8								
	Total	223	100	1	2	1.50	0.50	-0.009	0.163	-2.018	0.324

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error. Gender was coded as binary variables (1 = male, 2 = female).

Prior to the primary analyses, Shapiro-Wilk tests (Table 2) were conducted to assess the normality of the three study variables: perceived autonomy support at work (WCQ), controlling behaviour (CB), and romantic relationship conflict (RPCS). The results indicated statistically significant deviations from normality for all three variables - WCQ: $W(223) = 0.955$, $p < .001$; CB: $W(223) = 0.868$, $p < .001$; and RPCS: $W(223) = 0.985$, $p = 0.019$. Given these violations of the normality assumption, non-parametric analyses were employed in subsequent correlation analyses, specifically Spearman's rho (ρ).

Table 2 Tests of Normality for Perceived Autonomy Support, Controlling Behaviour, and Relationship Conflict

Shapiro - Wilk			
Variable	Statistic(W)	df	p
WCQ	0.955	223	0.000
CB	0.868	223	0.000
RPCS	0.985	223	0.019

Note. W = Shapiro-Wilk statistic; df = degrees of freedom; p = significance level. WCQ = Perceived Autonomy Support at Work; CB = Controlling Behaviour; RPCS = Relationship Conflict.

3.2. Correlation Analysis

Spearman's rho correlations (Table 3) were computed to examine the associations among the three study variables. A significant negative correlation was identified between perceived autonomy support at work and controlling behaviour

($\rho = -0.534, p < .001$), indicating that lower levels of autonomy support in the workplace were associated with higher levels of controlling behaviour toward a romantic partner; the null hypothesis H_{01} was therefore rejected. A significant positive correlation emerged between controlling behaviour and romantic relationship conflict ($\rho = 0.426, p < .01$), such that higher controlling behaviour was associated with greater relationship conflict, supporting rejection of H_{02} . Additionally, a significant negative correlation was found between perceived autonomy support and romantic relationship conflict ($\rho = -0.288, p < .05$), indicating that lower autonomy support at work was associated with increased conflict in romantic relationships, supporting rejection of H_{03} .

Table 3 Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Among WCQ, CB, and RPCS *Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Among WCQ, CB AND RPCS*

Variable	1	2	3
1. Perceived Autonomy Support at Work (WCQ)	-		
2. Controlling Behavior (CB)	- 0.534	-	
3. Romantic Relationship Conflict (RPCS)	- 0.288	0.426	-

Spearman's rho correlations are reported. $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

3.3. Regression Analysis

Three simple linear regression analyses were conducted to determine the extent to which each variable predicted another (Table 4). Perceived autonomy support at work significantly predicted controlling behaviour ($R = 0.497, R^2 = 0.247, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.243, SE = 19.535, p < .001$), accounting for 24.7% of the variance in controlling behaviour; H_{04} was rejected. Perceived autonomy support also significantly predicted romantic relationship conflict ($R = 0.246, R^2 = 0.061, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.056, SE = 10.427, p < .001$), explaining 6.1% of the variance; H_{05} was rejected. Finally, controlling behaviour significantly predicted romantic relationship conflict ($R = 0.362, R^2 = 0.131, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.127, SE = 10.030, p < .001$), explaining 13.1% of the variance; H_{06} was rejected.

Table 4 Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analyses

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	SE
WCQ – CB	0.497	0.247	0.243	19.535
WCQ – RPCS	0.246	0.061	0.056	10.427
CB – RPCS	0.362	0.131	0.127	10.030

Note. WCQ = perceived autonomy support; CB = controlling behaviour; RPCS = relationship conflict.

3.4. Mediation Analysis

A mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples to examine whether controlling behaviour mediated the relationship between perceived autonomy support at work and romantic relationship conflict (Table 5). In the first path, perceived autonomy support at work significantly predicted controlling behaviour ($B = -9.49, SE = 1.12, t(221) = -8.51, p < .001$). When both perceived autonomy support and controlling behaviour were simultaneously entered as predictors of romantic relationship conflict, controlling behaviour remained a significant predictor ($B = 0.15, SE = 0.03, t(220) = 4.40, p < .001$), while the direct effect of perceived autonomy support on conflict was non-significant ($B = -0.81, SE = 0.66, p = .221$). The indirect effect of perceived autonomy support on conflict via controlling behaviour was statistically significant (Effect = $-1.44, \text{Boot SE} = 0.29, 95\% \text{ CI} [-2.02, -0.89]$), as the confidence interval excluded zero. This pattern of results is consistent with full mediation, such that controlling behaviour fully accounts for the relationship between workplace autonomy support and romantic relationship conflict. H_{08} is therefore rejected.

Table 5 Mediation Analysis Examining Controlling Behaviour as a Mediator Between Perceived Autonomy Support at Work and Romantic Relationship Conflict (N = 223)

Outcome Variable	Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
CB	WCQ	-9.49	1.12	-8.51	< .001	[-11.69, -7.30]
RPCS	WCQ (Direct Effect)	-0.81	0.66	-1.23	.221	[-2.11, 0.49]
	CB	0.15	0.03	4.40	< .001	[0.08, 0.22]
Indirect Effect (Bootstrapped)						
Indirect Effect	Effect	Boot SE		95% Boot CI		
WCQ → CB → RPCS	-1.44	0.29		[-2.02, -0.89]		

Note. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. Indirect effect estimated using 5,000 bootstrap samples.

3.5. Gender Differences

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether gender moderated any of the three study variables. No significant gender differences were found for perceived autonomy support ($t(213.32) = -1.44, p = 0.152$), controlling behaviour ($t(221) = 0.42, p = .675$), or romantic relationship conflict ($t(221) = 1.55, p = 0.123$). Accordingly, H_{07} is retained across all three variables.

Table 6 Independent Samples t Test examining differences in Perceived Autonomy Support, Controlling Behavior, and Romantic Relationship Conflict

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2 tailed)
Perceived Autonomy Support (WCQ)	8.557	0.004	-1.438	221	0.152
Controlling Behavior (CB)	0.018	0.892	0.420	221	0.675
Romantic Relationship Conflict (RPCS)	3.714	0.055	1.548	221	0.123

Note: F = Levene's test for equality of variances; t = t statistic; df = degrees of freedom; p = two-tailed significance level.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between perceived autonomy support at work, controlling behaviour toward a romantic partner, and romantic relationship conflict in a sample of 223 adults, with controlling behaviour proposed as a mediating mechanism. The findings broadly supported the hypothesized model grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the spillover hypothesis, with several key results warranting detailed consideration.

4.1. Perceived Autonomy Support at Work and Controlling Behaviour

The significant moderate negative correlation ($\rho = -.534, p < .001$) and meaningful predictive relationship ($R^2 = .247$) between perceived autonomy support at work and controlling behaviour provide robust empirical support for the cross-domain spillover hypothesis within the framework of SDT.[1] The finding indicates that when individuals experience thwarting of their autonomy needs in the workplace, they are more likely to engage in controlling behaviours within their romantic relationships. This is consistent with SDT's proposition that need frustration does not remain contained within a single life domain but instead exerts a compensatory or reactive influence across domains.[2] Environments that support autonomy have been demonstrated to foster autonomous behavioural regulation and need satisfaction across multiple areas of life,(22,23) and the converse appears equally true: contexts that undermine autonomy may generate coercive or controlling patterns that overflow into personal relationships.

4.2. Controlling Behaviour and Romantic Relationship Conflict

The significant positive correlation ($\rho = .426, p < .01$) and regression findings ($R^2 = .131$) linking controlling behaviour to romantic relationship conflict are consistent with established theoretical perspectives on interpersonal coercion and dyadic functioning. Controlling behaviours directed toward a partner have been consistently associated with elevated interpersonal tension, impaired communication, and increased conflict escalation.[9] From a relational systems

perspective, controlling actions disrupt the balance between autonomy and interdependence that is essential for adaptive dyadic functioning.[9] Taken together, the present findings reinforce that partner control is not merely a correlate of relationship dissatisfaction, but a meaningful behavioural antecedent of overt relational conflict.

4.3. Perceived Autonomy Support at Work and Romantic Relationship Conflict

The significant direct negative correlation ($\rho = -.288, p < .05$) and small yet statistically significant predictive effect ($R^2 = .061$) of perceived autonomy support on romantic relationship conflict extend the spillover model beyond purely behavioural mediators. This suggests a direct psychosocial pathway linking adverse workplace experiences to the quality of intimate relationships, over and above any behavioural route. These findings align with the broader spillover and crossover literature, which posits that occupational stress, frustration, and depleted psychological resources are transmitted to family and romantic interactions through mechanisms such as mood carryover, emotional exhaustion, and diminished coping capacity [24],[25] The present study thus contributes evidence that autonomy-suppressive work environments carry implications that are felt not only professionally, but interpersonally.

4.4. Full Mediation by Controlling Behaviour

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding of the present study is the pattern of full mediation, whereby controlling behaviour completely accounted for the relationship between perceived autonomy support at work and romantic relationship conflict (indirect effect = -1.44 , 95% Bootstrap CI [$-2.02, -0.89$]). The non-significant direct effect of perceived autonomy support on conflict once controlling behaviour was included in the model ($B = -0.81, p = .221$) indicates that the primary pathway through which workplace autonomy thwarting influences relational conflict is via the adoption of controlling behaviours toward one's partner. This finding provides empirical specificity to SDT's cross-domain need frustration model, suggesting the operative mechanism is not solely affective carryover such as moodiness or emotional depletion but rather a distinct behavioural response: compensatory partner control, which in turn precipitates relational conflict. These results underscore the importance of identifying modifiable behavioural mechanisms in translational research targeting couple wellbeing and workplace health.

4.5. Gender Differences

The absence of significant gender differences across all three variables (all $p > .10$) is congruent with the fundamental tenets of SDT, which asserts that psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are universal and not intrinsically differentiated by gender.(1) These findings are further supported by Slemm et al.,[2] whose meta-analytic review demonstrated that gender did not consistently moderate the association between supervisor autonomy support and employee outcomes. Research employing the RPCS has similarly reported no notable gender differences in self-reported conflict levels,[21] and community-based studies of controlling behaviour have generally demonstrated gender symmetry in its prevalence and correlates.[26],[27] Collectively, these results suggest that the mechanisms linking workplace autonomy support to controlling behaviour and relationship conflict may operate similarly across genders, lending generalizability to the present findings and reinforcing the universal applicability of SDT's motivational framework.

5. Summary and Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Findings

Among 223 employed adults in romantic relationships, the study found that perceived autonomy support at work negatively correlated with controlling behaviour, which in turn positively correlated with relationship conflict. Autonomy support also directly predicted relationship conflict. Crucially, mediation analysis confirmed that controlling behaviour fully mediates the link between workplace autonomy support and relationship conflict. No significant gender differences were found.

5.2. Conclusion

The findings confirm that workplace psychological climate extends beyond organisational boundaries, shaping employees' personal relationships. When employees feel autonomy-thwarted at work, they are more likely to exhibit controlling behaviour toward partners, which heightens relationship conflict. Controlling behaviour emerged as the key interpersonal mechanism through which occupational need frustration affects relationship quality.

5.3. Implications

Theoretically, the study extends SDT across domains, showing that autonomy frustration operates as a transdiagnostic mechanism beyond the workplace. The gender-neutral findings reinforce SDT's universality. Practically, organisations should embed autonomy-supportive principles into leadership and culture programmes. Therapists should assess clients' workplace experiences when addressing controlling relational behaviour.

5.4. Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional, self-report design limits causal conclusions, and convenience sampling affects generalizability. Future research should use longitudinal or experimental designs, daily diary methods, partner reports, and more diverse samples.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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