

SOURCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS. THEORETICAL INSIGHTS AND A CASE STUDY

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Conflict in university is a phenomenon drawing increasing attention on behalf of managers and staff. This article is the result of a study aimed at analyzing the sources of organizational conflict based on the attitudes and opinions of staff and managers working in the Islamic Azad University of Sanandaj branch in Iran. In the article, the descriptive -exploratory method was applied. The population was 521 official and non-official members of the Sanandaj University. 220 individuals were chosen as the sample. Reliability was approved through Cronbach alpha (0.87). Statistical methods were applied using the SPSS software. Results revealed that, between managers and staff, there were conflicts regarding incompatible goals, ambiguity and role conflict, ambiguous rules, inconsistent evaluation and reward systems, job stresses, and deficiency in the information system of the university.

Key words: *conflict; organization; managers; staff; university.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a sort of social status in which two or more people either face with disagreement concerning fundamental issues or show emotional hostility towards each other [1]. Conflict is an interactive process characterized by disagreement and incompatibility and occurring among social creatures, and an interpersonal dynamic process which is shaped in accordance with the internal and external conditions of the parties,

affecting individual and group achievement positively or negatively [2]. Conflict refers to the fabric of our daily life. Historically speaking, men have always been aware of this phenomenon but, unfortunately, due to lack of proper management, it can change into hostility. Therefore, today, the human resource within organizations possesses an unpleasant background about conflict and considers it a negative phenomenon. This problem occurs when two or more people confront

with disagreement because they have different needs, aims, and values. So, it requires having thorough knowledge of conflict management to manipulate it. Some believe knowing how to manage conflict is as important as the ability to read, write and speak [3]. Nowadays, many managers are somehow crippled when facing this fact and prefer to escape from it. Not having sufficient information could be the reason of this fear. Presence of different persons having a variety of personal features, requirements, and perceptions would contribute to conflicts in organizations like universities [4]. Since university is the kind of social system in which individual and group activities play a fundamental role, it seems it ought to have tension and conflict more than any other social system. In a complicated organization, like a university, which has varying interests and benefits, mental conflict would be inevitable. Conflict in university can be the result of factors like limited sources, people with different interests, and the large structure of the university [5]. Recently, to optimally tackle problems resulted from conflict, and also help managers and staff, methods concerning solving conflicts have sparked in organizational studies and discussions. Thus, being aware of sources and reasons of conflict, and of how to manage conflict in universities would be of significant importance to managers and staff. Conflict is a problem attracting much attention on behalf of managers and staff so becoming familiar with reasons and sources of conflicts in universities and their future courses would culminate

in the development of organizational sciences and also in a dynamic scholarly society. Organizational conflict can appear due to various reasons influencing the amount of satisfaction among managers and staff. Undoubtedly, managers should assist the organization in materializing its purposes. This requires an appropriate management and staff's satisfaction [6].

Several studies show that attitudes, beliefs, perception, and expectations of managers within the area of education, and their relations with staff, could either blunt or facilitate executing tasks by employees. It is noteworthy to state that staff and professors with inactive thoughts are unable to help or encourage learners in the course of learning. So, the more relaxing and soothing the environment for educational forces in universities and educational centers is, the greater the tendency towards training, followed by increased efficiency in universities including educational progress of learners. Many of the dissatisfactions, such as poor functioning, non-effective activities, degradation in the level of operations, and conflicts between managers and staff, all come from the deficient understanding of factors causing conflict. Given the importance of understanding the sources and causes of conflict in an organization, the aim of this study was to analyze the sources of organizational conflict within the Islamic Azad University, Sanandaj, among administrators and staff. Moreover, this was followed by the examination of the dimensions underlying the concept of "conflict".

2. DEFINING CONFLICT

The ways in which social conflict has been theoretically conceptualized and operationally defined in psychological research have overlapped considerably, although important distinctions do exist. Mary Parker Follett, an early scholar of organization behavior and pioneer in the study of conflict, defined conflict simply as “difference” [7]. Pioneering social psychologist Kurt Lewin defined conflict more broadly as “a situation in which oppositely directed forces of about equal strength play upon a person simultaneously” [8]. Morton Deutsch [9], a leading conflict scholar and student of Lewin characterized conflict as existing whenever incompatible activities (opposing goals, claims, beliefs, values, wishes, actions, feelings, etc.) occur. The psychologists and conflict scholars Dean Pruitt and Sung Hee Kim (2004) logically extended these prior definitions by describing conflict as arising from perceived divergence of interest [10]. Our definition of social conflict builds on the work of Follett, Lewin, Deutsch, and others but also acknowledges contemporary calls to view conflict not as a single event or situation occurring at a specific moment in time, but rather as a process unfolding in relationships over time [11]. Accordingly, we define conflict as a relational process influenced by the presence of incompatible activities. These process typically occurs in a relational context that has a history and a normative trajectory. In other words, conflicts, or incompatible

activities, often only perturb the flow of ongoing psychosocial processes.

3. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this part the researchers are trying to review and study the work of other researchers on the topic approached by this article.

Juan D. (2008) [12] in a study entitled “Systematic resolution of conflict situations in collaborative facility design” presents the following conclusions concerning the findings of the research undertaken: incorporation of principles for prevention of conflict perpetuation and escalation improved effectiveness; implementation of computer-based learning increased usefulness; and integration of conflict detection and resolution resulted in increased effectiveness of the facility design process.

Filiz Kantek (2009) [13] in the study “Conflict in schools: Student nurses’ conflict management styles” determined that the students preferred to use styles that produced positive results in conflict resolution and that the frequency of experiencing conflict and the feeling of success in conflict had an effect on the choice of conflict management style. Therefore, we believe it will be helpful to analyze the relationship between the causes of conflict between the student and the instructor in the practice field and the uses of conflict management styles.

Jesse S. (2009) [14] in “A comparative test of work-family conflict models and critical examination of work-family linkages” indicates that “direct effects drive work-family conflict models

while indirect effects provide little incremental explanation with regard to satisfaction outcomes”.

Kuo-Hsiung (2010) [15] in the study “Conflict-coordination learning in marketing channel relationships: The distributor view” highlights that positive conflict attitudes are positively related to conflict coordination learning (CCL), and that avoidance of conflict behaviors is negatively related to CCL. Furthermore, the results indicate that joint marketing strategy quality mediates the relationship between CCL and joint profit performance. Specifically, under high positive conflict attitudes, CCL strongly appears related to joint marketing strategy quality.

Ike C. Ehie (2010) [16] in “The impact of conflict on manufacturing decisions and company performance” underlines that “(...) conflict can facilitate or hamper company performance in an operational decision-making setting. Our results indicate that when conflict arises in a manufacturing decision, cognitive conflict would lead to a higher level of company performance particularly when the decision scenario is based on a market responsive situation (innovative products). Consistent with previous studies, affective conflict tends to have adverse effects on performance regardless of the decision scenario”.

Jia-Chi Huang (2010) [17] in the study entitled “Unbundling task conflict and relationship conflict: The moderating role of team goal orientation and conflict management” points out results showing that

“team goal orientation and a conflict management approach moderated the relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict. The positive relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict was weaker under conditions of higher team learning orientation and lower team performance orientation. The positive association between task conflict and relationship conflict was also weaker among teams that engaged in cooperative conflict management and did not engage in the avoiding conflict management approach”.

Robert Goldblatt’s study (2011) [18] “Unlocking conflict through creative expression” the quantitative results had high inter-rater reliability and gave clear support for Cooper’s Conflict Ladder as an instrument to further measure conflict for art therapists. The qualitative findings were consistent with the quantitative findings, clearly supporting the practical application of the instrument and furthering exploration and investigation of art therapy as a tool for assessment of conflict and avenue for therapeutic reduction of conflict.

Charlotte M. Karam’s scientific investigation (2011) [19], “Good organizational soldiers: conflict-related stress predicts citizenship behavior” aims her study at examining employee behavior in times of conflict, namely the relationship between employee conflict-related stress and engagement in organizational citizenship behavior and the role of cohesiveness as a potential cross-level moderator of this relationship. As opposed to previous research in the field, the

results indicated that employees engage more in organizational conflict behavior (OCB) when they experience greater amounts of stress and that this is more likely to occur in cohesive groups rather than in non-cohesive groups. In terms of the social implications, the conclusions pinpoint that *“extraordinary times call for extraordinary efforts and that employees often meet this challenge through their engagement in behaviors that will contribute positively to the social-psychological environment of the workplace”*.

Sonja Rispens’s study (2012) [19] *“The Influence of Conflict Issue Importance on the Co-occurrence of Task and Relationship Conflict in Teams”* confirms *“the buffering effect of conflict issue importance. When teams fight about important task issues, no association between task conflict and relationship conflict was found. This effect could be partially attributed to the decrease in negative emotions present in teams during important task conflicts”*.

Richard A. Posthuma (2012) [21] in the study *“Conflict management and emotions”* indicates that a broad range of positive and negative emotions, such as anger, enthusiasm, excitement, guilt, and remorse, are significantly related in complex and varied ways to various aspects of conflict management. The studies highlight not only the importance of understanding specific emotions in conflict situations, but also the need to understand how and when the regulation of emotions can facilitate effective conflict management.

Carlos Montes (2012) [22] in *“Affective choice of conflict management styles”* reveals that affective groups statistically differ in their self-reported conflict management styles. Positive moods and feelings have been found to be related to the preference for more cooperative strategies.

Moritz Römer’s study (2012) [23] entitled *“A Helping Hand? The Moderating Role of Leaders’ Conflict Management Behavior on the Conflict–Stress Relationship of Employees”* confirmed their expectations *“that the perception that leaders engaged in third-party forcing behavior and avoiding behavior amplified the effects of conflict on conflict-related stress. Furthermore, they found that leaders’ third-party problem-solving behavior had a buffering effect on the association between relationship conflict and conflict-related stress”*.

Paul Teague et al. (2012) [24] in *“Line managers and the management of workplace conflict: evidence from Ireland”* showed that confident, independent and well-supported line and supervisory involvement in conflict management is a direct function mainly of the adoption of commitment-oriented HRM and indirectly of the influences that prompt firms to invest in this model. Organizations without commitment-oriented HRM policies are likely to possess inadequate support structures to assist line managers in carrying out conflict-management activities.

O. P. Akinnubi et al. (2012) [25] in *“Principal’s Personal Characteristics and Conflict Management in*

Kwara State Secondary Schools, Nigeria” indicated that a significant relationship existed between principal’s personal characteristics and conflict management in the Kwara State secondary schools. Hence, it was recommended, among others, that the principal should understand the cause of conflict in the school system and use appropriate strategies to ameliorate the situation based on personal characteristics. Saeed Moghaddas Pour et al. (2012) [26], in “*An empirical study to measure the relationship between management style and conflict management*” confirmed that there is only a meaningful relationship between relationship-oriented leadership with solution-based conflict management. In other words, the survey indicates that when there is a conflict, management can handle the problem using their relationship and find appropriate solutions to resolve any possible conflict.

L.M. Wamocha (2012) [27] in “*Intervention Measures in Conflict Management in Boarding Secondary Schools in Western Province, Kenya*” showed that the concept of “conflict management” refers to an act and also a process of resolving disputes between two or more parties with the view of coming to a resolution. The significance of the study findings were: to provide greater insight to the administrators of secondary schools on the intervention measures in conflict management in boarding secondary schools. Furthermore, the findings of the study may help education policy makers, managers of schools, head teachers and teachers in providing guidelines on proper use of

punishment in conflict management.

The conclusion derived from the review provided above is that none of the research studies cited is related to the issue of “sources of organizational conflict”. However, all studies mention the existence of differences and suggest means to solve these.

4. RESERCH STUDY DETAILS

Based on the theoretical input, this study aims at making the following point concerning the topic of “sources of organizational conflict”: to execute a project in an appropriate manner is to gather the topical information from the right place (hence what we called in our research model “variables of job status”). Therefore, a model of research detailing two types of variables derived from the concepts of “organizational conflict sources” is proposed, as presented in **Figure 1**.

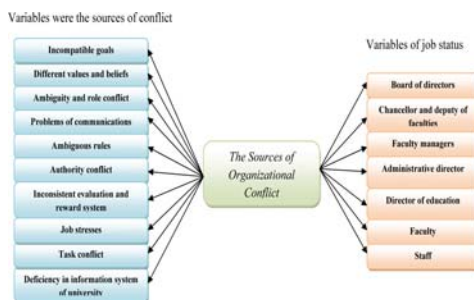


Figure 1. The proposed research model

4.1. Research hypotheses

The research hypothesis underlying our study were formulated as follows:

1. Between members of the university, in the incompatible goals, there are significant differences.

2. Between members of the university, in the different values and beliefs, there are significant differences.
3. Between members of the university, in the ambiguity and role conflict, there are significant differences.
4. Between members of the university, in the Problems of communications, there are significant differences.
5. Between members of the university, in the Ambiguous rules, there are significant differences.
6. Between members of the university, in the Inconsistent evaluation and reward system, there are significant differences.
7. Between members of the University, in the Authority conflict, there are significant differences.
8. Between members of the University, on the job stress, there are significant differences.
9. Between members of the university, in the Task conflict, there are significant differences.
10. Between members of the University, in the Deficiency in information system, there are significant differences.

4.2. Materials and methods

This research used a descriptive-exploratory method. The study population consisted of 521 staff of Islamic Azad university of Sanandaj branch in 2012. According to Morgan table, 218 persons formed the sample. 218 questionnaires were distributed and all were returned. The variables were the sources of conflict including incompatible goals, different values and beliefs, ambiguity and role conflict, problems

of communication, ambiguous rules, authority conflict, inconsistent evaluation and reward system, job stresses, task conflict, and deficiency in information system of university. The variables of job status included board of directors, chancellor and deputy of faculties, faculty managers, administrative director, and director of education, faculty and staff. To collect data, the authors of this article compiled a questionnaire based on other researchers' questionnaires and variable definition: Mcshane's conflict sources [28], Everly's [29] and Hellriegel's [30] stress, role ambiguity and contrast, Dubrin's [31] job conflict. Because the main questionnaire was a combination of the other ones, 15 professors majoring in management were asked to comment. After implementing the necessary changes, final edition of questionnaire was prepared. Then, in a preliminary study by a test-retest method, the questionnaire was distributed among the staff of the Islamic Azad University of Sanandaj branch. The resulted correlation coefficient was %88. Cronbach alpha determined the inter-reliability of questions (0.87). Statistical methods of this research involved one-way variance analysis, and Tukey post hoc test. The SPSS software tools were applied to analyze the data.

4.3. Results

In analyzing sources of organizational conflict, in order to make it clear in which aspect conflict exists between managers and staff, one-way variance analysis was utilized. Table 1 contains the results of this analysis.

Table 1. One-way variance analysis to recognize sources of conflict in university

Analysis of sources of organizational conflict for university member (managers, faculty, staffs)	F	sig	Confirm or reject of comparisons
First: Between members of the university, in the incompatible goals, there are significant differences.	3.465	0.001	Confirm
Second: Between members of the university, in the different values and beliefs, there are significant differences.	0.343	0.862	Reject
Third: Between members of the university, in the ambiguity and role conflict, there are significant differences.	2.859	0.022	Confirm
Fourth: Between members of the university, in the Problems of communications, there are significant differences.	0.745	0.875	Reject
Fifth: Between members of the university, in the Ambiguous rules, there are significant differences.	4.624	0.000	Confirm
Sixth: Between members of the University, in the Authority conflict, there are significant differences.	0.370	0.974	Reject
Seventh: Between members of the university, in the Inconsistent evaluation and reward system, there are significant differences.	3.346	0.006	Confirm
Eighth: Between members of the University, on the job stress, there are significant differences.	3.752	0.016	Confirm
Ninth: Between members of the university, in the Task conflict, there are significant differences.	1.714	0.134	Reject
Tenth: Between members of the University, in the Deficiency in information system, there are significant differences.	2.475	0.018	confirm

Table 2. Tukey HSD, to analyze the sources of organizational conflict

Dimensions of conflict	A:post	B: post	Mean difference	sig	Std. Error
incompatible goals	Board of directors	Faculty	2.85714*	0.028	0.91734
		staffs	3.24167*	0.007	0.89336
	Chancellor and deputy of faculties	Staffs	2.52738*	0.039	0.83036
		Staffs	2.52738*	0.039	0.83036
Ambiguity and role conflict	Board of directors	Staffs	1.07500*	0.025	0.87640
		Staffs	1.07500*	0.025	0.87640
	Chancellor and deputy of faculties	Staffs	2.31310*	0.043	0.81460
		Staffs	2.31310*	0.043	0.81460
Ambiguous rules	Board of directors	faculty managers	5.64286*	0.009	1.59414
		Faculty	5.44643*	0.003	1.40339
		Staffs	4.97500*	0.006	1.36669
	Board of directors	Faculty	3.33929*	0.004	1.25508
		staffs	3.54167*	0.043	1.22226
		Staffs	2.97024*	0.037	1.13607
Inconsistent evaluation and reward system	Board of directors	Faculty	3.33929*	0.004	1.25508
		staffs	3.54167*	0.043	1.22226
	Chancellor and deputy of faculties	Staffs	2.97024*	0.037	1.13607
		Staffs	2.97024*	0.037	1.13607
job stress	Board of directors	Faculty	3.70238*	0.036	1.44687
		staffs	4.42500*	0.031	1.40904
	Board of directors	faculty managers	4.71429*	0.004	1.91098
		Faculty	4.51786*	0.022	1.68231

Results of the Tukey post hoc test imply that regarding incompatible goals, the board of directors of this university had a meaningful difference with both staff and faculty members. The amount of this difference was 0.007 and 0.028 respectively. The Chancellor and deputy of faculties had a meaningful difference with the level of 0.039. About ambiguity and role conflict, the difference level of 0.023 was found between the board of directors

and staff, and the level of 0.045 between the chancellor and deputy of faculties and staff. Concerning the dimension of ambiguous rules, the board of directors had the meaningful difference of 0.009, 0.003, and, 0.006 with faculty managers, faculty members, and staff, respectively. For inconsistent evaluation and reward system, the differences of the board of directors with faculty members and staff were 0.004 and 0.043, and the chancellor and deputy of faculty with staff was 0.037. For Job stress, the board of directors had differences of 0.036 and 0.031 with faculty members and staff respectively. The level of differences of board of directors with faculty manager and faculty members, regarding deficiency in information system of university, was 0.034 and 0.022, respectively.

4.4. Discussion

There was a meaningful difference between members of Sanandaj University concerning incompatible goals. It seems much of disagreement between managers and staff over university goals yields from either insufficient knowledge of both camps from given goals or lack of transparency of university goals.

Concerning the subject of different values and beliefs, no meaningful difference appeared among university members. Based on the results obtained, the Sanandaj University decreased differences in beliefs and values by periodically changing members' organizational positions. Moreover, the members of Sanandaj University had a meaningful difference about ambiguity and role

conflict. Implemented studies clarified that managers did not specify responsibilities and job expectations of staff.

Related to the problem of communication, no meaningful difference appeared among university members. According to the study done, it appears that Sanandaj's Azad University could use non-official communications, like participating in meetings, stadiums, etc, among its members. Furthermore, we distinguished university staffs pay high attention to facial communications, that is, one of the most effective methods of communication. These measure eliminated differences of university members in communications.

Discussing about ambiguous rules, we found a meaningful difference among members of the university. In this regard, performed studies manifested sheer differences in university's rules. Also, policy-makers did not make clear rules and approaches, resulting in deficiency in swift and instantaneous decisions and thorough knowledge of entire rules. Neither staffs nor managers allocate enough time to understand rules properly. Authority conflict faced no proof of presence among members of university.

With attention to the results of researchers done in this respect, it seems Sanandaj University was able to harmonize tasks of staff with the domain of their authority. Every person performs its tasks hinged on the domain of authority.

There is a meaningful difference between university staffs regarding inconsistent evaluation and reward systems. Due to the system shortage in terms of coherence and equality-

oriented and also based on scientific studies, especially concerning the psychological dimensions of giving rewards to employees, managers cannot materialize the real influence of rewards or punishments. On the other hand, staffs know that by accepting decisions of managers that are in contrast with their beliefs, they can get rewards. If staffs disagree with managers, and they are proven right to do so, they will be punished. This problem in the reward and punishment system causes a heavy atmosphere orienting employees towards not expressing their opinions but just accepting what managers say. Therefore, as a whole, organizations will face degradation in productivity if there is merely blind acceptance.

Job stress, as another source of organizational conflict, encountered a meaningful difference among the members of the Sanandaj's university. It seems the lack of concern for the mental and physical limits of the staffs and the positions job descriptions of faculty and employees, cumulated with the exceeding expectations of managers led to harsh stress of staffs. This stress somehow evolves and the overall feeling is that whatever staffs do seems lame to the board of directors.

Furthermore, job security is a matter of drastic fear and stress among the members of the university for, anytime, they may face firing. Managers, in turn, use this working atmosphere as a yoke to manipulate employees.

The members of the Islamic Azad university of Sanandaj branch had no meaningful difference regarding task conflicts. It means university specified borders of tasks

in a way that no abnormal and clear conflict appeared. Deficiency in the information system of university faced no meaningful difference among members of university. A coherent and applied system based on computer and information technology would be vital so that members are capable of giving their opinions, suggestions, and critics to superior officials. This process could promote productivity and speed in long term. Such an advanced system needs allocating budget to purchase required hardware and software, and also, hiring updated experts. Unfortunately, managers did not consider this as a serious subject.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research indicate that there are concerning sources of organizational conflict among managers and staffs in the Sanandaj's Islamic Azad University, like incompatible goals, ambiguity and role conflict, ambiguous rules, inconsistent evaluation and reward system, job stresses, and deficiency in information system of university, led to conflict in members of university.

Concerning the incompatible goals, it is recommended that managers decrease conflict at varied levels by concentrating over main goals. More commitment to comprehensive goals by faculty members and staffs will culminate to diminished focus on personal purposes and reduction of inter-personal conflicts. To solve ambiguity of roles, managers can help members via specifying their exact duties and expectations.

Talking about ambiguous rules, there should be complete specification of rules and procedures by policy makers of the university. Analyzing university rules, the authors recognized obvious differences in them, including: level of employment, payment and working hours, decisions about managing human resources, and so on. Hereby, it must be noticed that rule-makers should pay more attention to the process of codifying laws.

Regarding the inconsistent evaluation and reward system, rational criteria are required for paying wages; that is, every person is rewarded in accordance with his or her outputs. The university can implement a system of presenting material and non-material rewards, and assessing the outcome of this system prevents favors in rewarding.

To solve the job stress problem, a re-planning of task allocation is needed. Giving more responsibilities to staffs, delivering distinguished tasks to members, and freedom in performing tasks, are subjects that should be considered in the re-planning process. If people do not accept heavy duties, specialized tasks would be compatible to their needs, and if there are people enjoying no changes in daily duties, distrust and conflict will be visible in organization.

To remove deficiency in the information system of university, applying not only recognized facilities of acknowledged systems, but also state-of-the-art tools in the realm of information technology, such as, electronic education, teleconferences, databases of Excel and Access, and

etc, would assist the implementation of a better information system. The current status of the information system in university clarifies potential opportunities still not extracted. With respect to the needs related to information technology and systems, a comprehensive program is advisable to be compiled, in part to help backup operations like server and network security, and in part to confront with crisis and unexpected events, e.g. internet attacks.

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