Identifying the Factors Causing Interpersonal Conflict in Organisations (Through Analysing Secondary Data)

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Abstract

The main *purpose* of this article is to identify a list of the factors of interpersonal conflict (IpC) (which occurs between two or more individuals within any organisation and it is one type of organisational conflict) through analysis secondary data (the literature review) in order to be used in many empirical studies on the subject of IpC and its management. *Methodology*: this study was based on analysis of secondary data which was the main method of data collection. The secondary data collected from different sources such as books, articles and theses. *Findings*: from analysis the secondary data (literature review), the study has identified a list of the factors causing IpC can be divided into two main categories: firstly, personal factors like: individual differences; threats to status; lack of trust; and incivility. Secondly, organisational factors as: limited resources; unfair treatment; role ambiguity; role incompatibility; organisational change; contradiction of goals; information deficiency and environmental stress. *Research Limitations*: this study has focused on identifying the factors of IpC only in the past decade, and has not addressed the other types of organisational conflict (OC). *Practical Implications*: the study would be helpful for many managers, and could be used in many empirical studies on IpC and its management. *Originality/value*: this article looks at all the alternative view of the factors of IpC, and it is expected that it will open the debate on the other factors of OC. *Keywords:* Conflict, interpersonal conflict, organisational conflict, conflict management

Introduction

Conflict within any organization is an inevitable and unavoidable occurrence and has a negative outcome on the individual and the organization, unless properly managed (Almusdy, 2007; Tjosvold, 2006; 2008). In addition, these conflicts, take up a lot of managers' time at all managerial levels (Luthans, 2008; Slocum and Hellriegel, 2007; Hitt, et al. 2006; Al-Nimr 1994). This idea is supported by Hitt et al. (2006: p. 436) who stated that

''One survey showed that managers spend approximately 25% of their time dealing with conflict. In some fields (such as hospital administration and management of municipal organizations), managers can spend as much as 50% of their time managing conflict. Managers rate conflict management as equal to or higher in importance than planning, communication, motivation, and decision making''.

Therefore, many authors have argued that conflict with different types within organisations is an important topic to focus on; that its importance increases over time (Hellriegel and Slocum, 2004; Hitt et al., 2006; Luthans,

2008; Almusdy, 2007) and that this may be due to the rise of globalisation and interdependence. The negative effects of conflict may deprive the organization from achieving its goals, may waste time and effort and can lead to a low quality of work (Hitt et al., 2006). It could also have a negative impact on the motivation and productivity of the employees (Ibid) and on the performance of the organization, unless properly managed to eliminate its negative consequences and thus obtain positive results (Robbins, 2007; Hellriegel & Slocum, 2004; Hellriegel et al., 1992). On the other hand, conflict inside any organization does not always have a negative effect; on the contrary, sometimes conflict has positive effects, and this might lead to improved problem solving or decision- making, to the stimulation of creativity and may increase the productivity (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2004). This positive aspect of conflict depends on how it is controlled and managed (Hatch, 2006; Adomi & Anie, 2006; Almusdy, 2007; Tjosvold, 2006; 2008).

Moreover, identifying the factors which cause conflict in any organisation is considered the main stage in the process of conflict management. This idea has supported by many scholars like Robbins and Judge, 2008; Schermerhorn et al., 2005; Rahim, 2002. In addition, this study attempts to shed more light on the importance of identifying the factors causing organizational conflict for each type separately. That because the nature of each type of conflict is different from others. Therefore, this study will focus on answering the main research question which is: ‘what are the factors causing IpC in organisations as shown in the literature in the past decade?’

Background

Authors writing on organisational behaviour call conflict within organisations ‘organisational conflict’ (OC) which can take on any of several different forms, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup and inter-organisational conflicts. It can be noted that the prefix ‘inter’ means "between," whereas the prefix ‘intra’ means "within".

Intrapersonal conflict: this kind of conflict occurs within an individual because of actual or perceived pressures from incompatible goals or expectations (Schermerhorn, et al., 2005). Nelson and Quick (2006) argued that intrapersonal conflict can be managed with careful self analysis and diagnosis of the situation.

Interpersonal conflict (IpC): this is a conflict that occurs between two or more individuals. Many individual differences lead to interpersonal conflict, including personalities, culture, attitudes, values, perceptions, and the other differences (Elsayed-Elkhouly, 1996). Newstrom, (2007) argued that IpC is a serious problem to many people because they deeply affect a person’s emotions. This research will identify the factors which cause it and justifications for choosing this type of conflict will be addressed in section (2.1.1).

Intergroup conflict: this occurs between groups or teams in an organisation. Nelson and Quick (2006) argued that conflict between groups can have predictable effects within each group, such as increased group cohesiveness, increased focus on tasks, and increased loyalty to the group. In addition, this kind of conflict will lead to a competition between groups which must be managed carefully.

Interorganisational Conflict: this occurs between organisations and is most commonly thought of in terms of the competition and rivalry which characterises companies that operate in the same markets (Schermerhorn et al., 2005).

Justifications for Choosing Interpersonal Conflict (IpC)

The purpose of choosing IpC and not any other OC is because individuals are the main element in any organisation and without them organisations cannot exist. Also, Newstrom, (2007) stated that IpC is a serious problem to many people because it deeply affects a person's emotions. Moreover, this type of conflict can spread rapidly among individuals within organisations and its negative outcome has a strong influence on the parties involved in the conflict if it is not controlled (Al-Nimr, 1994; Bader, 1988).

Research problem

Through studying the literature of IpC, the researcher has observed that the factors of IpC are not identified separately but they have been studied in general and they underlie the factors of organizational conflict. Thus, there were a huge number of these factors, which can not be confined to an individual group because the literature addresses the factors of intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict, intergroup conflict and interorganisational conflict together. Therefore, this study will focus on identifying the factors of IpC in particular and will not address the other types of organizational conflict.

The need for the research

There are two main factors which make this study a valuable area to investigate, these being:

- Identifying the factors of IpC is considered to be one of the most important topics to be investigated because these factors are considered to be one of the main stages in the process of interpersonal conflict management;
- The significance of this study stems from the fact that this study will open the door for more empirical studies regarding IpC and its management.

Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to identify a list of the factors causing IpC through analysis secondary data. The objectives of this study are:

- To conduct a review of secondary data from different sorces such as books, articles and theses.
- To study and analysis the relevant literature on the concept of IpC to understand the causal factors;
- To provide a list of factors that causes IpC.

Research Limitations

This article focuses on identifying the factors of IpC only in the past decade, and it has not addressed the other types of OC.

Practical Implications of the study

The study could encourage other researcher to identify the other factors of organisational conflict, such as identifying a list of factors causing intrapersonal conflict, intergroup conflict or interorganisational conflict. This study would be also helpful for many managers and could be used in many empirical studies on Ipc and its management.

Research Methodology

This research is undertaken as a theoretical study which will use a secondary data (literature review) as the main data collected. As known secondary data refers to collected data from different sources: such as publications books; articles and theses. The data was gathered from Salford library database and catalogue in the past decade. In next section, the secondary data will be analysis and discussion.

Findings and Discussion

The researcher has gathered together most what has been written about the factors causing IpC (as found in the salford library database and catalogue) during the past 10 years and some of this data has come from theses found online. Through studying this data the researcher observed that most of them are theoretical studies.

Alswalim, (2000) argued that the main factors causing IpC are: individual differences; unfair treatment; role ambiguity and role incompatibility. In 2002, Newstrom and Davis has listed the factors of IpC as organisational change, different sets of values, threats to status, contrasting perceptions, lack of trust and personality clashes (individual differences). Newstrom, (2007) has added other factor which is 'incivility' to form a new list and thus the new list contains seven factors instead of six. Hellriegel and Slocum, (2004) stated that IpC could occur based on individual differences or some type of role incompatibility or role ambiguity. Al-Otaibi, (2006) identified four factors which cause IpC: limitation of resources; lack of determining competences; lack of defining responsibilities and contradiction of goals. While, Adomi and Anie, (2006) have argued that individual differences and cultures differences are the main factors causing IpC. Luthans, (2008) lists the factors which have caused IpC as: individual differences; information deficiency; role incompatibility and environmental stress.

Individual differences means that everyone has a unique background because no one has the same family traditions, education, culture, intelligence, ability, motivation, perceptions, attitudes, personality and values.

Therefor, individual differences can be the major source of interpersonal conflict (Luthans, 2008; Adomi and Anie, 2006). As discussed above, could be add different sets of values, contrasting perceptions and individual differences together under name of 'individual differences'.

Role ambiguity refers to the uncertainty and lack of clarity of determining competences and defining responsibilities. Thus, the three factors (role ambiguity, lack of determining competences and lack of defining responsibilities) can be merged together under name of 'role ambiguity'.

In the preceding discussion, it can be seen that some researchers have researched certain factors such as individual differences (Alswalim, 2000; Newstrom and Davis, 2002, Newstrom, 2007; Hellriegel and Slocum, 2004; Adomi and Anie, 2006; Luthans, 2008) and in Role ambiguity (Alswalim, 2000; Hellriegel and Slocum, 2004; Al-Otaibi, 2006) and in role incompatibility (Alswalim, 2000; Hellriegel and slocum, 2004; Luthans, 2008). Table 1 summarises the the main factors causing IpC in past 10 years.

Table 1.The main factors causing IpC in past 10 years

Factor of IpC	**The researcher' name and the year of its publishing**
Individual differences	Alswalim, (2000); Newstrom and Davis, (2002), Newstrom, (2007); Hellriegel and Slocum, (2004); Adomi and Anie, (2006); Luthans, (2008)
Unfair treatment	Alswalim, (2000).
Role ambiguity	Alswalim, (2000); Hellriegel and Slocum, (2004); Al-Otaibi, (2006).
Role incompatibility	Alswalim, (2000); Hellriegel and Slocum, (2004); Luthans, (2008).
Organisational change	Newstrom and Davis, (2002); Newstrom, (2007).
Threats to status	Newstrom and Davis, 2002; Newstrom, (2007)
lack of trust	Newstrom and Davis, 2002; Newstrom, (2007)
Incivility	Newstrom, (2007)
limitation of resources	Al-Otaibi, (2006)
Contradiction of goals	Al-Otaibi, (2006)
Information deficiency	Luthans, (2008)
Environmental stress	Luthans, (2008)

The researcher prefers to incorporate all these various factors in a list which can be organised into two broad categories: *personal factors* and *organisational factors.*

Personal factors: which arise from differences among individuals. They can be divided into:

- *Individual differences:* everyone thinks, feels, looks, or acts alike, and some people simply rub us the wrong way, and we cannot necessarily explain why, personality differences can also cause conflict as well as different values and beliefs (Newstrom, 2007);

- *Threats to status:* the social rank of a person in a group is very important to many people in any organization. Therefore, when they feel that they will lose their status, they become a powerful driving force and struggle to maintain a desired image (Ibid);

- *lack of trust:* every continuing relationship requires some degree of trust that opens up boundaries, provides opportunities in which to act, and enriches the entire social fabric of an organization (Ibid);

- *Incivility*: workplace incivility occurs when employees fail to exhibit concern and regard for others or -worse yet--disrespect each other on the job (Pearson and Porath, 2005). Lack of consideration can appear in many forms, including brusque greetings, sarcasm, failure to return borrowed supplies, selfishness, showing up late for appointments, untidiness, noise (such as playing a radio loudly). Workplace incivility can cause tensions to rise, anger to grow, and conflict to emerge (Newstrom, 2007).

Organisational factors: those stem from nature of the organisation and the way in which work is organized. They can be divided into:

- *Limitation of resources:* all organisations have limited resources and attempt to find the most efficient way to divide the resources and accomplish tasks. One study found that competition for limited resources often leads to negative conflict (Hitt, et al., 2006);

- *Unfair treatment:* Some organisations have a strong status difference between managers and non-managers (employees). For example, managers have flexible schedules, personal telephone calls allowed at work, and longer lunch hours which are not available to other employees. This may lead to resentment and conflict;

- *Role ambiguity:* when an individual does not have adequate information on the nature of the work required of him in the organization or when he has a lack of of determined competences or lack of defined responsibilities. This may lead him into conflict with others;

- *Role incompatibility*: in this situation conflict occur when an individual finds himself do more one role which include incompatible goals;

- *Organisational change:* with the pace of technological, political and social change increasing and the marketplace hurtling toward a global economy. Organisational changes will be over-present and then conflict will exist (Newstrom, 2007);

- *Contradiction of goals:* out of necessity, organisation members frequently pursue goals that are somewhat different from one another and they are sometimes incompatible or contradiction, thus setting the stage for potential conflicts;

- *Information deficiency:* This source of conflict results from communication breakdown in the organization. It may be that the two employees in conflict are using different information or that one or both have misinformation. This source of conflict is not emotionally charged and after corrected, there is little resentment (Luthans, 2008);

- *Environmental stress:* it is more likely that conflicts will occur in environments that are characterized by a lack of resources, by downsizing, competitve pressures, or by high degrees of uncertainty (Ibid).

Conclusion and Further Research

This article has focused on identifying a list of the factors of interpersonal conflict by analyzing the secondary data (the relevant literature review of IpC). It has also tried to open the debate to identifying the factors that causing organisational conflict individually, an area that most scholars have not looked at.

As a result of this article a list of the factors causing IpC has been identified and it has divided into two main groups: personal factors and organisational factors. *Personal factors* have involved: individual differences, threats to status; lack of trust; and incivility. *Organisational factors* have contained: limited resources; unfair treatment; role ambiguity; role incompatibility; organisational change; contradiction of goals; information deficiency and environmental stress.

Furthermore, this study is a part of an ongoing doctoral research that aims to investigate and identify the factors of IpC in the Libyan cement industry. As far as the researcher is aware, this study will be the first of its kind to be conducted in the Libyan environment and therefore this study will present original work in this area.

Finally, the researcher recommends other scholars to identify the other factors of organisational conflict, such as identifying a list of factors causing intrapersonal conflict, intergroup conflict and interorganisational conflict which in turn, can give opportunities to many researchers for further study on managing each different kind of organisational conflict.

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