

Gender Effect on the Styles of Managing Interpersonal Conflicts: An Exploratory Study on the Academic Staff of Sirte University

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ABSTRACT

Background: Conflict in organizations is ever present and yet rarely understood. At universities, academic staffs deal with conflicts in a daily basis. The choice of a style in managing a conflict situation can be affected by the type of gender and though female or male academics might choose to apply different style(s). Although there was a dearth of studies carried out on the management of interpersonal conflict from various aspects, but no similar study was found that belongs to the Libyan context. This might contribute to the empirical support of the existence of gender differences in conflict manifestation at workplaces which can enhance our understanding of conflict management styles as they differed among males and females.

Purpose: First, to identify the most and least dominant conflict management styles of respondents and to test the hypothesis which anticipated that there would be significant differences between them based on their gender and that male academics would be more competing than female academics as handling their interpersonal conflicts. Second, to explore other aspects related to the prevalence of this issue such as; its underlying causes, level of its occurrence, and the level of management effectiveness as perceived by respondents. The study involved 78 academics of Sirte University in Libya. Thomas-Killmann Conflict Mode Instrument was used to identify the respondents' styles of conflict management.

Findings: The study observed that the academic staff practiced all the five styles but in varying levels. In sum, collaborating was the most dominant style followed by competing. Avoiding was the least dominant style followed by compromising. Male academics were mostly competing while female academics were mostly collaborating. The only significant difference between the practiced styles based on the gender variable was observed on competing and compromising styles.

KEYWORDS: conflict management styles, interpersonal conflicts, gender, academic staff, Libya.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict, as a human behavior, is inherent to all social life [44] including working communities though, it is considered as natural, [6], [15], [20] inevitable, [35], [34], [16] and immense [22] workplace phenomenon that happens frequently between any working individuals. Consequently, handling conflict is a daily occurrence for all of us [17] to the extent that it is not something to underestimate [12] or to be ignored. [39]

Furthermore, working in modern contexts caused organizations to become more and more dependent on teamwork as a central unit of work and moved them gradually towards teamwork principle. This shift to the collaborative team-based structures can lead to substantially higher degrees of organizational conflict. [44], [5] As a result, conflicts became an integral part of the fabric of a postmodern society that is increasingly litigious, competitive, complex and alienating. [8] To explain that, conflict among working teams can be seen as a normative expression of human diversity [22] because they consist of individuals who might have difficulty in being compatible with those they work with. Since it interferes with group process, argued Garcia (2013) [20], group members may become unwilling to work with members of the group. For example, in a famous study that was conducted by CPP Global Human Capital Report in 2008 [10], it was found that conflict reduces cooperation and a sense of "team" when it is poorly handled. Two thirds of the study's participants admitted that they have gone out of their way to avoid a colleague because of a disagreement at work, which is likely to create a distraction and defocusing of the team.

Therefore, for a group to be effective, individual members need to be able to work in a positive conflict environment [29] not in an atmosphere that full of hassles and incompatibilities with others, because that will

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inevitably lead to the destruction of work relationships among workers and thus reduces the level and quality of their productivity.

For the aim of supporting organizations in maintaining a harmonized and productive working atmosphere, conflict in the workplace was readily researched since the 1960s [7] where many researchers tried hard to study different aspects of it such as; its management styles, causes, positive and negative effects on organizations, etc. Since then, the number of researches on this subject was immense [43] and regarded as an important subject in organizational research. [34] Indeed, numerous studies have been conducted to decipher the intricacies of conflict and negotiation processes in both the social psychological laboratory and within work teams in organizations. [12]

At universities, conflicts also exist as academic members are always interacting with each other and with others around them. Though, there would be a high level of probability for them to experience interpersonal conflicts over some personal or work-related issues and hence, conflicts in academic institutions prevail mainly by dint of the mutual differences exist between all the university's cadres. As a result, conflict in higher education is inescapable [16] and is a daily occurrence [1] which led universities to become confronting with countless pushes and pulls from internal and external sources which influence the kind and quantity of conflicts that emerge. [16]

The manifestation of such a workplace phenomenon, from the other hand, indicates a lack of healthy interpersonal relationships between team members and that sound principles are not being applied in managing the activities of the organization. [29] Therefore, and for purpose of curing its negative effects, it became critical to explore how the academic staff react to and manage their interpersonal conflicts but after taking into account, said Mahar, *et al*, (2011) [32], that the notion that human being itself is extremely unpredictable from the psychological façade and perplexing behavioral patterns. These patterns, according to Goodyear, (2006) [22], are considered as the basis for the uniqueness of human identity. This uniqueness, Goodyear, continued, becomes then the basis for expression and behavior that emphasize individual separateness. In consequence, such personal differences can make working individuals tend to adopt different methods or styles to manage such an issue in a way that enhances their ability of reaching their goals and satisfying their needs. One major step for our study though is to determine the most and least styles that applied by the Libyan academic staff for managing their interpersonal conflicts.

For that sense, it was necessary to investigate the different variables that may affect the sort of reaction and style of management. Amongst the major variables that might affect an individual decision to select a particular style for handling a conflict situation is the gender variable which has been known as an important variable that influences conflict management styles [1] that when addressed reflects the effect of gender-role of that particular individual. [3] Accordingly, and in order to develop a thorough understanding of interpersonal conflict in workplaces, the majority of previous research explored sex differences in relation to conflict management in organizations. (Brusko, 2010) [7] But, referring to Brusko, again, up to date, this body of research is filled with several inconsistencies. For instance, although many authors (e. g., Çetin, and Hacifazlıoğlu, 2004 [9]; Brahmam, et al, 2005 [6]; Vokić, and Sontor, 2010 [43]; Brusko, 2010 [7]; Mahar, et al, 2011 [32]; Adebile, and Ojo, 2012 [1], Altmäe, et al, 2013 [4]) observed meaningful differences between the two genders in which it was obviously determined that male and female employees applied different styles to manage conflict but, contrary to these findings, other scholars (e. g., Korabik, et al, 1993 [31], Farooqi, et al, 2013 [15], Salleh, & Safarali, 2013 [38], Odetunde, 2013 [34]) where unable to find major differences between males and females respondents in relation to their use of conflict management styles. Further, among those studies where the gender differences were found, there were no significant variances between the male and female selected styles to the extent that researchers themselves described them as insignificant differences. Thus, it seems necessary to re-explore once more if these differences actually exist between male and female employees in the way they handle their interpersonal conflicts. Finally, and in order to have a clearer image about the issue, there is a calling need to explore the underlying causes behind the occurrence of these conflicts from the perspectives of the study respondents which is the first necessary step for managers intend to effectively manage such a work-related phenomenon. In regard to all of that, the researcher will seek to reinvestigate all these factors again particularly if we know that the surrounding cultural environment of the study sample is relatively different from those of the previous ones.

LITERATUR REVIEW

Conflict Definition:

The term 'conflict' might be interpreted or understood in variant ways and though defined diversely. Various definitions have given to the term from various disciplines such as psychology, behavioral sciences, sociology, communication and anthropology. [39] For instance, Swanström, and Weissmann, (2005) [40] suggested that conflicts should not be defined simply in terms of violence (behavior) or hostility (attitudes), but also include incompatibility or differences in issue position. Dix, *et al*, (2008) [13] saw conflict as a discontent that aroused from

a perceived clash of interests. Henry, (2009) [27] from his side, regarded it as a dispute that occurs when interests, goals or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible with each other while Fatile, and Adejuwon, (2011) [16] argued that conflict is what occurs when two or more parties have divergent interests over distribution of resources and/or issues touching on their development. Lately, Garcia, (2013) [20] believed that it should be defined as a disagreement, a battle or to be at odds. Much of this confusion, according to Rahim, (2001) [35], was created by scholars in different disciplines who are interested in studying conflict and though, explained Suppiah, and Rose, (2006) [39], there was no one comprehensive definition of conflict as it depended on which perspective one is looking from.

In spite of that, the review of literature can provide us with different perspectives of the topic based on which we can presume that conflict is a sort of incompatibility between two or more parties involved in the situation of conflict. These incompatibilities stem from different causes and can be divided as follows:

i) Incompatibility in interests and concerns: looking to the subject from this side, conflict might be considered it as a disagreement with regard to interests or ideas and as a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. [44] Similarly, Robbins, (1998) [37] viewed conflict as a process that begins when one party perceives that the other party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that they care about.

ii) Incompatibility in goals and values: From this angle, conflict is viewed as an interaction of interdependent people who perceive an opposition of goals, aims and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals. [11], [19]

iii) Incompatibility in interaction: workplaces are consisted of different employees who came from different backgrounds and have to deal with each other continuously. Referring to Fatile, and Adejuwon, (2011) [16], conflict results from human interaction in the context of incompatible ends and where one's ability to satisfy needs or ends depends on the choices, decisions and behavior of others. Due to this necessary interaction, things do not always turn the way people want it to be [20] and conflict become prevalent to the extent that it become sustaining in human interaction, communication and decision making. [22] Based on this assumption, conflict is considered as an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities. [37], [35], [30]

iv) Incompatibility in relationships: when a group of organization members could not find a ground of cooperation between them, then, personal disagreements surface and conflicts occur. In a study that was performed by Fatile, and Adejuwon, (2011) [16], it was found that the independency of individuals is a major reason behind conflict inevitability. In addition, relationship conflicts revolve around socio-emotional and relationship issues [5] and can be reflected in unlimited negative feelings that can make individuals respond aggressively to others' behaviors and actions. In contrast, employees who obtain healthy interrelationships, these relations would act as a moderator that helps them to avoid or minimize conflicts even if they were caused by other reasons than relationship conflicts.

Interpersonal conflicts:

While employees interact with each other towards accomplishing their work assignments, working places become interactive environments consist of huge interrelationships that spread throughout the organization. In return, work organizations would become networks of interpersonal relationships designed to reach an objective and accomplish goals. (Garcia, 2013) Consequently, it is crucial for the management and everybody else to notice that having people working in a unity and harmony creates better company [20] because good working relationships are important to achieve organizational goals. [34]

From the other side, with such quantity of interaction, there is a high probability that an employee, for whatever reason, might have a sort of disagreement with one or more employees over some personal or work-related issues that soon is developed to an interpersonal conflict situation. It's therefore, possible to argue that conflict is endemic to human relationships and societies [16] and that interpersonal conflict is the most apparent form of conflict for workplace participants. [14] According to Rahim, (2001) [35], conflict can be examined in terms of personal and group orientation such as: interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup and intra-group conflict.

The complexity of such a problem comes from the fact that when interpersonal conflict occurs, explained Iravo, (2011) [29], people are more concerned with gaining advantage over others than with task performance. As a result, employees' interpersonal relationships became intense and work harmony and coordination suffer. More to it, when working relationships are being disrupted and the conflict has reached destructive levels, said Garcia, (2013) [20], it has likely become dysfunctional creating poor performance and needs to be addressed. Such negative outcome cannot be ignored or simply treated because damaged relationships, asserted Odetunde, (2013) [34], would hinder future work together initiatives. In regard to this, people must learn to maintain harmonious relationships and

discuss issues openly, respectfully and rationally to make their conflicts productive [20] so that organizational members can work with each other effectively for attaining their individual or joint goals. [38]

Causes of Work Interpersonal Conflicts:

For effective and successful management of any interpersonal conflict, the first step is to try to explore the main causes behind its existence. At work, there are many factors that might form the pattern(s) of conflict situations and make employees suffer from many negative emotions. Since these patterns are neither similar nor permanent in all situations thus, no doubt that managing it effectively requires digging deeply under its roots to completely understand its nature and find out what causes that stand behind its occurrence. Then the management or solution becomes much easier and efficient. Since the value of conflict can be determined by how it is managed, managers should know its sources and consequences so that they can find ways of managing it. [29] In accordance to that, the management or handling of the origin (causes) is the only effective way to ensure that conflict will not develop again or if it does, that it will be guided in a way that is beneficial to both the disputants and the organization. (Havenga & Visagie 2011) One major reason of adopting such a strategy is that there are a variety of sources of workplace conflict including interpersonal, organizational, change related, and external factors. [14] This necessitate that, for managers to be able to manage it in a proactive manner, they have to be fully informed about these causes. Otherwise, any action they undertake in the course of solving it would be a waste of time and efforts or it may result in reverse outcomes and make the situation become even worse. Furthermore, many recent studies have proven the vital role of determining the underlying causes of employees' interpersonal conflicts. For instance, in the pre-mentioned study of CPP (2008), employees were asked to identify what managers could do to address workplace conflict more effectively. More than 50% confirmed that managers should identify and address underlying tensions before things go wrong. Building on that, managers have to be aware that the management of interpersonal conflict involves the diagnosis of and intervention in affective and substantive conflicts at the interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup levels and the styles (strategies) used to handle these conflicts. [36] Therefore, any management process of conflicts to deem successful, should consist of two main stages:

- 1- The diagnostic stage: As mentioned above, the first step in dealing with this problem is to specifically identify the causes of conflicts and the common ground that exists between them, rather than just measuring their effects and symptoms because good managers work at the source of conflict [41] not on the minimization of its associated effects.
- 2- The intervention stage: Since it is the responsibility of managers to intervene in these problem areas to improve workplace conflicts and thereby improve morale and productivity [25], [24] thus, managers first have to define the style in which they would handle the issue, and second, the proper solution that would satisfy all the conflicting parties with regard to the organization's interests. Otherwise, they may be solving the cause of the problem, but not the root of it (Graham, 2009) [23] which means, the author continued, that the issue may resurface later.

A systematic review of several scholars and scientific publications provides us with a clear idea about some major factors that can account for patterns of interpersonal conflict. For example, Allan, *et al*, (2005) [3] found that high workload pressure, long working hours, unsupportive management, and weak employee control over work are the main cause of the exacerbation in work/non-work conflict. Referring to CPP's study again [10], around half of respondents saw personality clashes and warring egos as the primary cause of workplace conflict while more than one third viewed stress and workload pressures as the key factors of conflict. Nayeri, and Negarandeh, (2009) [33] in their study concluded that the emerging themes of conflict were; the perceptions and reactions to conflict, the organizational structure, the management style, the nature and conditions of job assignment, the individual characteristics, and the mutual understanding and interaction. A year after, Hotepo, *et al*, (2010) [28] found that the major causes of organization conflict are; lack of resources, different expectations, competition, and lack of cooperation, salary comparison, interdependence, and communication problems and interdependence while around 30% of respondents in the study of Adebile, and Ojo, (2012) [1] were of the opinion that conflicts are caused by communication problem. Agwu, (2013) [2] in his results, revealed that the main sources of conflicts at work were related to individual perceptions and value problems. In addition, Havenga and Visagie, (2011) [26] and Vokic and Sontor, (2009) [42] are with the believe that conflicts mainly aroused from basic human instincts, disagreement over workloads or power, problems in communication, individual differences in needs, wishes, goals, values, opinions, preferences or behaviors, opposing views with regard to procedures and policies, or conflicting judgments and interpretations of facts. Based on this review, we can identify four major patterns of employees' interpersonal conflicts:

- 1- **Work/personal relationships:** Relationship conflicts emerge when employees fail in building and maintaining constructive relationships with others around them. In return, they would be surrounded by the feeling of isolation and incompatibility with others. Based on that, in a hostile working environment, said Hall, (2007), relationships may be strained if an individual is forced to work in teams with members who do not function well in teamwork. Such conflicts are unproductive, hard to manage, and likely to leave people with more pressure and less ability to manage them. [18] Hence, it's important to remember that conflicts start when bonding ends. [30] Indeed, a good knowledge of the personalities in their team will help managers be alert to potential flashpoints and personality clashes. It will also help guide them towards the most effective methods of resolution for each individual, based on their needs and styles. [10]
- 2- **Perception of attitudes:** An essential part of the creation of any conflict situation is how each party perceives the action or attitude of the counterparty and vice versa which can be a factor that can throw parties into a state of incompatibility in their perception of the issue at hand or issue of interest. [14], [2] the state of conflict though, is based on perceptions, rather than on attitudes or behavior as it has generally been defined. (Swanström, & Weissmann, 2005) [40] When discussing the concept of conflict, the authors added, perception should be included as a central concept since the conflicts and the opponent's intentions often are defined according to subjective perceptions.
- 3- **Systems of values and beliefs:** Since employees come from different cultures and backgrounds, their belief systems and sets of values could be relatively different. Wilmont, and Hocker, (2011) [45], in their definition of conflict, affirmed that it is a struggle between two or more interdependent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals. The issue here is that values and beliefs are core and essential in determining the method of thinking and making decisions and opinions about everything which, in consequence, results in conflict among the staff.
- 4- **Goals and priorities:** It is another common denominator behind interpersonal conflicts which exists when one person believes another is interfering with his/her goals [21] and though these goals are threatened or hindered by the activities of another person. [2], [20] It is a situation that occurs when individuals who work together adopt goals that are incompatible. Unshared goals make team members unable to find a common motive that drives them in the same direction. Instead, they would be fighting about the prioritization of each goal and though conflict within this group would be inevitable. This results into a situation whereby they frustrate each other in an attempt to achieve their objectives. [28]

METHODOLOGY

Aim: The principle aim of the study is to map up the patterns of the university's academics' choice of interpersonal conflict management styles through determining their most and their least dominant style(s) of conflict management and to explore if there are differences between academics' choices of conflict management style based on their gender. Also, the study is aimed at defining the underlying causes of academics' interpersonal conflicts as well as exploring their perspectives about superiors' level of effectiveness in managing such an organizational dilemma. Finally, the researcher and by investigating such an issue, it's considered as a part of his aim to develop new ideas that could be used for future studies.

Problem Statement:

- 1- What are the most and least dominant conflict management styles used by the academic staff of Sirte University?
- 2- In the light of the gender variable, are there significant differences between male and female academics in the way they manage their interpersonal conflicts?

Related sub-questions which are aimed to be answered in this study are as follows:

- A- Are there meaningful differences among the two gender groups of academics in terms of their perspectives about the identity of the counterparty in the conflict situation?
- B- Are there meaningful differences among the two gender groups of academics in terms of their perspectives about the effectiveness level of their management in managing these conflicts?
- C- Are there meaningful differences among the two gender groups of academics in terms of their perspectives about the underlying causes of their interpersonal conflicts?

Scope: A group of academics (N=78) who work at the public university of Sirte during the academic year of 2012-2013 constituted the scope of this study.

Procedure: The Participation in the study was voluntary. With the assistance of some academic colleagues, questionnaires were personally distributed to participants by visiting them in their offices. A period of ten days was allowed for completing the questionnaires. Each copy included a cover letter informing participants not to mention their names or departments. 108 copies were distributed and around 83 copies were returned among which, only 78 copies were properly answered.

Ethical approval: Participants were informed that all data would be treated as confidential and only the researchers would have access to the data collected.

Objectives

- 1) To explore the most and least styles Libyan academics apply when managing their interpersonal conflicts.
- 2) To explore if differences exist between male and female academics in the way they handle their interpersonal conflicts.
- 3) To explore the underlying causes of the occurrence of interpersonal conflicts as perceived by the study's respondents.

Hypotheses:

H1- There would be considerable differences between Libyan academics in university of Sirte in the way they manage their interpersonal conflicts on the basis of gender.

H2- As raised in a masculine society, Libyan male academics would intend to act more competitively than female academics when managing their interpersonal conflicts.

Sample: Sample group was chosen randomly from the academic staff of Sirte University. The participation was voluntary and participants were (N= 78) with a response rate of 73.48%. Characteristics of the sample are detailed in (Table1).

Instruments: A two-part questionnaire was used for data collection on the basis of the literature survey. The first was designed to identify a) the gender of participants as a dependent variable of the study, b) the counterparty with which the participant usually has interpersonal conflicts [superiors, colleagues, university and faculty administrators, and students], c) the frequency of encountering the situation of interpersonal conflicts [always, usually, sometimes, and never] and d) the root causes behind the occurrence of interpersonal conflicts as perceived by the academic staff of the university (Uncooperative relationships, personality differences, lack of team cohesiveness, lack of communication, lack of transparency, and openness, incompatibility of goals, negative attitudes, lack of interpersonal skills) and e) the effectiveness level of the management as perceived by respondents (very effective, effective, relatively effective, not effective). This questionnaire was pre-tested to improve its validity and relevance to the objectives of the study. It also scrutinized for errors and omissions, ambiguity, legibility and relevance. The questionnaires' content, structure and sequence were appropriately amended to remove any ambiguities and to enhance content validity.

The second was Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, a well-known tool that was adopted to assess the respondent's style of managing conflict. Assertiveness and cooperation are two key parameters that are used to assess people's preference for how to deal with conflict, resulting in five distinguishable modes: avoiding, compromising, accommodating, competing and collaborating. It consists of 30 pairs of forced choice statements requiring participants to identify the one they consider most characteristic of their behavior in times of interpersonal conflict.

RESULT ANALYSIS

Our study was sought first to identify the most used conflict management style(s) among the selected university academics and second, to explore if there is any effect of the gender variable on the academics decision of selecting these styles.

The obtained data from the first questionnaire was analyzed by using frequency counts and percentages while those data that related to the determination of the conflict management style and its correlation to gender was statically analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), (version 18.0 for Windows). The analysis included a summary of measures such as means of conflict styles, gender, and standard deviation.

FIRST PART: General Findings

A- Participants:

The total population of the sample (N=78), (Table 1) consisted of 53.84% males and 46.15% females.

Table 1: Sample Distribution with Respect to Gender

GENDER	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Female	36	46.15 %
Male	42	53.84 %
TOTAL	78	100.00 %

B- Frequency of conflict occurrence:

In relation to the frequency of encountering with interpersonal conflicts, there were considerable differences between the two genders. (Table 2) indicated that male academics were encountering with conflict situations more than female academics. For males, 9% said always, and 44% said usually while for females, only 2% said always, and 26% said usually.

Table 2: The frequency level of encountering interpersonal conflicts:

FREQUENCY	MALE	FEMALE
Always	9%	2%
Usually	44%	26%
Sometimes	47%	71%
Never	0%	1%

C- Causes of interpersonal conflicts:

By looking at (Table 3), we can realize that there are some statistical differences between the two genders concerning the underlying patterns (causes) of interpersonal conflicts faced by the academic staff when interacting with different parties in university campus. For instance, male academics believed that personality differences are the most important cause of interpersonal conflicts (86%) followed by uncooperative relationships (81%) and incompatibility of goals (79%). Lack of communication (69%) was also major cause for the emergence of interpersonal conflicts. The female group from their side believed that incompatibility of goals (78%) is the major cause of interpersonal conflicts they face within the campus followed by lack of cohesiveness (69%), personality differences (67%), and lack of interpersonal skills (64%). The answers of (Yes) for each sentence of the whole sample were then gathered in order to figure out the major causes of all the (78) academics.

Table 3: Perceived causes of interpersonal conflicts

Causes of Conflict	Male	%	Female	%	%
	N=42		N= 36		N=78
Uncooperative Relationships	34	81%	19	53%	68%
Personality Differences	36	86%	24	67%	77%
Lack of team cohesiveness	27	64%	25	69%	67%
Lack of Communication	29	69%	22	61%	65%
Lack of transparency and openness	19	45%	22	61%	53%
Incompatibility of Goals	33	79%	28	78%	78%
Negative Attitudes	28	67%	16	44%	56%
Lack of Interpersonal skills	26	62%	23	64%	63%

Referring to (Table 3), incompatibility of goals (78%) and personality differences (77%) were the most important causes, followed by uncooperative relationships (68%), lack of team cohesiveness (67%) and then lack of communication (65%).

D- The counterparty in the conflict process:

In relation to the counterparties with whom academics used to have interpersonal conflicts, results indicated that in sum, both groups have interpersonal conflicts with other parties as follow; 46% with colleagues, 23 % with direct superiors, 18 % with university and faculty administrators, and 13% with students.

E- Level of management effectiveness:

The percentages presented in (Table 4) showed that the management, as perceived by the respondents, was relatively effective (58%, 61%) in managing interpersonal conflicts faced by those respondents, while around 30 % of them saw it as ineffective at all.

Table 4: The effectiveness level of management in managing interpersonal conflicts

Level of Management Effectiveness	Opinion of Males	Opinion of Females
Very effective	2%	1%
Effective	14%	7%
Relatively effective	58%	61%
Not effective	26%	31%

SECOND PART: Gender Differences in Conflict Management Styles

The analysis was mainly performed in order to see academics self-report on using each interpersonal conflict management style at the five levels and to explore the affect of gender on the academics’ adoption level to these styles when handling their conflicts.

Table 5: Conflict Management Styles: Means & Standard Deviation

Conflict Management Style	MIN	MAX	MEAN	STD
Collaborating	4.00	13.00	9.52	1.89
Competing	5.00	14.00	9.33	3.03
Avoiding	3.00	12.00	5.48	1.80
Accommodating	4.00	14.00	8.97	1.90
Compromising	4.00	12.00	7.86	1.54

Regarding (Table 5), in which the scores of the five styles of conflict management of the entire sample were presented, we can realize that the academic staff of Sirte University did not stick to use one particular style as handling interpersonal conflicts with whom they interact with. According to these scores, there were statistical differences in relation to the level of adoption of each style. Collaborating was found to be the most dominant style (mean: 9.52) of managing interpersonal conflicts among the university’s academics while avoiding was the less dominant style (mean: 5.48). The second most dominant style was competing (mean: 9.33) while second less dominant style was compromising (mean: 7.86).

In order to explore if there is relation between the adopted five styles of conflict management in regard to the background of variable gender, a t-test analysis was run (Table 6) to examine the study hypotheses which anticipate that there are differences between the two groups in the way that they handle interpersonal conflicts with others around them. Results indicate that collaborating still the most preferred of female academics (mean: 10.04), but competing became the most preferred style for male academics (mean: 10.19). Avoiding style still equally the less preferred style for both groups (5.85), (5.19). From the other side, female academics excelled than male academics in relation to mean scores on collaborating (10.04 vs. 9.09), accommodating (9.35 vs. 8.66), and compromising (8.46 vs. 7.38). Male academics excelled female only on competing (10.19 vs. 8.27).

According to this table, only two styles (competing & compromising) showed significant differences (less than 0.1) between the two gender groups (competing: $t = -2.508$, $sig. = .015$, level of $sig. = 0.05$; Compromising: $t = 2.835$, $sig. = .006$, level of $sig. = 0.05$). Competing style was in the favor of male academics while compromising style was in the favor of female academics. In addition, (Table 6) showed that female academics have the highest scores as well in collaborating (10.04) and accommodating (9.35) although these scores were not significant.

Table 6: Results of t-test Analysis

Conflict Management Style	GENDER	MEAN	STD	t	Df	Sig.
Collaborating	Female	10.04	1.80	1.934	56	.058
	Male	9.09	1.89			
Competing	Female	8.27	2.62	-2.508	56	.015*
	Male	10.19	3.10			
Avoiding	Female	5.85	2.03	1.398	56	.168
	Male	5.19	1.55			
Accommodating	Female	9.35	2.19	1.386	56	.171
	Male	8.66	1.60			
Compromising	Female	8.46	1.56	2.835	56	.006*
	Male	7.38	1.36			

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

DISCUSSION

In relation to the first part of our results, it was clear that male academics were encountering with interpersonal conflicts at work more than female ones. Our finding here was quite different from the findings that

were observed by CPP (2008) that women were involved in conflict situations more than men. This can be referred to the fact that in the culture of the Libyan society, in which females are treated with more respect, it's considered as an inappropriate behavior to argue with females and though, they would be encountered with less conflict situations either inside or outside work.

For the counterparties with whom these interpersonal conflicts were usually faced, we can realized that work colleagues were that main party of the conflict situation for both, male and female academics. Superiors were the second, followed by the university and faculty administrators. Similar results were earlier mentioned by Çetin, and Hacifazlıoğlu, (2004) [9] when they found that nearly half of the respondents experience conflict either with their colleagues or with their department heads. (11%) experience conflict with faculty administrators and (6.9%) experience with university administrators.

For the causes behind the emergence of interpersonal conflicts among the study respondents, incompatibility of goals was seen by both genders as the main cause followed by personality differences, uncooperative relationships, lack of team cohesiveness and then the issue of communication. Similar causes were, to some extent, defined by other researchers (e. g., Allan, *et al*, 2005[3]; Hotepo, *et al*, 2010[28]; Adebile, & Ojo, 2012[1]). This result indicates that there is a major problem that affects the interpersonal relationships of the university academics which led to occurrence of personality conflicts among them and explains why both groups, particularly males, admitted that they were usually encountered by interpersonal conflicts with others around them.

The feeling manifested among the academic staff that there is a considerable problem of interpersonal conflicts, explains to some extent the other findings which indicated the level of management effectiveness in managing such an issue. Around half of respondents agreed that their superiors were relatively effective while around third of them saw superiors as ineffective at all in managing it. This in return, can add more complications to the issue because when employees believe that their managers are incapable of conducting the needed action for solving work problems and maintaining a healthy work environment, they would then depend on themselves for dealing with it which might make it bigger and much complicated.

Regarding the second part of our results that involved surveying the affect of gender variable on the respondents' selected style of managing their interpersonal conflicts, it was found that in general, male and female academics were not laying on one particular style in managing every conflict situation they face. In fact, they were using more than one style. The same result was determined also by Salleh, and Safarali, (2013) [38] in a study that was performed in a similar work environment in Malaysia and observed that academic administrators had varying levels of practice of each style. For instance, collaborating style was mostly practiced, but also competing and then accommodating styles were also used widely by the academics. What should be noticed here is that both genders did not intended to avoid facing interpersonal conflicts with others. The avoidance strategy was the less preferred one academic follow when encountered with this problem.

In relation to gender differences, the identified results supported our hypothesis as there were statistical differences between male and female academics in the way selected to deal with their interpersonal conflicts that usually experienced with others within the university. More specifically, female academics were found to be mostly collaborative while male academics were mostly competitive. This clearly indicates, to an extent, that the gender variable has an effect on the decision of selecting the style by which a female or male prefer to handle a conflict situation.

Eventhough our result was in contrary with other previous findings (e. g., Korabik, *et al*, 1993)[31]; Havenga, & Visagie, 2011 [26]; Salleh, & Safarali, 2013 [38]; Odetunde, 2013 [34]; Farooqi, *et al*, 2013[15]), but, it matched with many other international findings such as the those of Çetin, and Hacifazlıoğlu, (2004) [9], Brahnam, *et al*, (2005) [6], Vokić, and Sontor, (2010) [43], Brusko, (2010) [7], Mahar, *et al*, (2011) [32], Adebile, and Ojo, (2012) [1] and Altmäe, *et al*, (2013) [4]. Although t-test (Table 6), did not show significant differences between the two genders except in competing and compromising styles in which males tended to be more competing ad females tended to be more compromising. This table also showed that in general, female academics were more collaborating and accommodating than males which confirms the previous results observed before by Brahnam, *et al*, (2005) [6], Vokić, & Sontor, (2010) [43] and Altmäe, *et al*, (2013) [4]. But it was different from those results that were presented by Çetin, and Hacifazlıoğlu, (2004) [9] who found that male academics were more accommodating than female ones and also against the results of Adebile, and Ojo, (2012) [1] which provided that males were using the bargaining and collaborating styles more than females.

In addition, the study's results showed that males intended to be more competitive than females which confirmed the findings of Vokić, & Sontor, (2010) [43] and Mahar, *et al*, (2011) [32]. Analogously, Brahnam, *et al*, (2005) [6] stated before that there is fairly consistent agreement in the empirical literature that men, unlike women, prefer to be more confrontational, aggressive, and competitive strategies which again confirm our result. But, to a varying degree, this was against the finding of Altmäe, *et al*, (2013) [4] which indicated that females were more competitive than males and also the finding of Brahnam, *et al*, (2005) [6] which revealed that males were more

avoiding than females. This difference can be again referred to the cultural differences between the Libyan society and other societies where these studies were conducted.

CONCLUSION

Interpersonal conflicts among universities' academic staffs prevailed as a natural element that affects their work relationships and daily interactions. The principle aim of the current study was to map up the patterns of choice of Sirte University's academics according to which they select a particular style to deal their interpersonal conflicts and to determine their most and their least dominant style(s) of conflict management. Also, to explore if there were any differences between academics' choices of conflict management style in respect to their gender type. In addition, the study is aimed at defining the underlying causes of academics' interpersonal conflicts as well as exploring their perspectives about superiors' level of effectiveness in managing these conflicts. Finally, by investigating this issue, it was aimed to develop some ideas that could help in conducting further complementary studies.

The study was divided to two major parts. Results of the first part inferred that the academic staff of Sirte University, particularly male academics, had a serious problem with interpersonal conflicts and that most of these of these conflicts were encountered colleagues, superiors, and administrative staffs. Also, the major underlying causes of this problem were incompatible goals, personality differences, uncooperative relationships, and lack of effective communications with others.

In the second part that was related to the adopted styles of conflict management, it was clear that those academics did not stick to a specific style for managing all situations, indeed, they were practicing all the five conflict management styles but in varying degrees. However, results revealed that the collaborating and then competing were the most dominant styles while avoiding followed by compromising were rarely utilized by them. Furthermore, results indicated that, in terms of the gender effect on academics selection of these styles, the style of competing was the most preferred style by male academics during interpersonal conflicts while collaborating was apparently more preferred by female academics.

From the preceding, we can conclude that interpersonal conflicts were, and will continue to be, a prevailing and an indispensable part of work interrelationships of the academic staffs at universities. More specifically, the study's results revealed that the occurrence of this work phenomenon has its underlying causes that should be immediately addressed and treated. Another point that must be taken into consideration is that the styles that were adopted by academics for managing their interpersonal conflicts can be influenced by their gender type to the extent that female and male academics utilizes divergent styles of dealing with their interpersonal conflicts. Though, any action towards managing this problem should take into account the gender differences between them.

This study though, is able to provide more insights into the theme of conflict management styles based on the gender variable. In some instances, our findings were, to an acceptable level, compelling and consistent with those of others around the globe. Even though the number of participants was limited, but the statistical figures of the study were described thoroughly and findings were discussed in the light of the existing management theories. Further, since our findings were in match with many previous studies, this can substantially support the linkages between them and adds more validation to these studies and in the same time, offer a background for assessing and managing employees' conflicts on the basis of gender.

Finally, despite the exploratory nature of the study, it is believed that its results can be viewed as supportive mean for understanding the current interaction and relations of the employees in the organizational context of universities. However, this can create a new horizon about human relationships in academic institutions which will be beneficial to manage interpersonal conflicts encountered by academic staffs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively deal with interpersonal conflicts encountered by the university's academics, the researcher suggests that the university management should consider providing specialized training programs for its academic staff to modify their intergroup and intragroup behaviors and to improve their capabilities of selecting the appropriate mode when managing any situation of interpersonal conflict they face within the campus.

From the other hand, although this study did not investigate superiors' conflict management styles or how much they were effective in managing academics' interpersonal conflicts but, to some extent, it does reflect all of that since the results clearly indicated the level to which those academics were suffering from it. In addition, academics' superiors should realize that their behaviors might have a dominant role to play in the group of their subordinates, particularly on level of conflict prevalence among them as well as their preferences for certain styles of conflict handling strategies. Correspondingly, this under sources the importance of enhancing the supervisors'

capabilities to better manage any interpersonal conflict manifested among the university academic staff. One way to do that is to prepare another training program for those superiors to first make them realize the criticality of such a problem and second to improve their skills and capabilities of dealing with it. A successful integration of the knowledge presented in this study and others into training programs would not only make the negative effect of academics' interpersonal conflicts decrease, but it would also enhance the quality of their work relationships and consequently improve their work performance and productivity.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Similar to many other studies, the current study was not totally free of limitations. Three foremost limitations were identified. Firstly, the study sample was relatively small in size. Secondly, it was conducted within one academic organization and in a restricted geographical area of the country. Thirdly, some other important demographical data were not included in the data. Due to these limitations, it might seem hard to generalize the study's findings and though there is a calling need to deal with these limitations in other future studies. Despite these limitations, the study's results could provide new avenues for continuing search on the subject of conflict management styles within academic institutions. The following ideas are presented by the researcher as proposal for future research. For instance, a longitudinal survey with larger scale is deemed necessary to overcome the issue of small sample, and a further consideration to additional demographical variables alongside the gender on academics' adoption of the five conflict styles can be more beneficial. Among these new variables there are age groupings, teaching experience, tenure in position, academic qualifications, type of faculty, etc.

Subsequent research should also probe the extent to which the pre-determined causes of personal conflicts contribute to specific response patterns and intentions to select a particular style of conflict management. By focusing on this part, researchers may be able then to depict the differences between the intentions of academics and their actual behavior during conflict situations. Further, there is an essential need to pay more attention to explore the performance level of academics under the effect of interpersonal conflicts.

Last but not least, since there was not any attempt made to discover the distinguishing influence of personality types on academics' choices of conflict managing strategies, the continuing research can also concentrate on the dynamics of personality dealt with these choices and how these types of personalities are related to specific responses to interpersonal conflicts.

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