Research article

Interpersonal Conflicts and Styles of Managing Conflicts among Students at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Interpersonal conflict happens everywhere and at any time and is inherent in all societies. However, the methods of managing such conflict are quite different from one organisation to the other. The general objective of the study was to assess interpersonal conflicts and styles of managing conflicts among students at Bahir Dar University. Mixed-methods research composed of quantitative and qualitative approaches was implemented for the study. One-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance was employed to identify the interaction effect between dependent and independent variables. The study showed that the major sources of conflicts were ethnic differences, religious diversity, sexual abuse, theft and insulting. It was also noted that compromising, avoiding and collaborating were frequently used conflict management styles between students. It is recommended that university leaders and students be expected to understand the real causes of conflicts for healthier management styles.
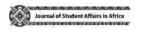
Keywords

conflict, conflict management, student experience, diversity, ethnicity, gender, undergraduate studies, Ethiopia

Introduction

The term 'conflict' has been used in different ways, referring to different forms of conflict (racial, ethnic, religious, political and gender), types of conflict (within an individual, between individuals, within a group and between groups) and places where conflict occurs (at home, in organisations, and on battlefields) (Hartwick & Barki, 2002, p.4). Scholars agree that the term 'conflict' is synonymous with individual/group disagreements, disputes, quarrels, physical fights and confrontations (Salleh & Adulpakdee, 2012, p.15; Olu & Abosede, 2003; Shahmohammadi, 2014). Although conflict hinders the attainment of one's goals, the consequences, however, might be beneficial if it brings help in the form of new insight for the groups. In relation to this, Dincyürek, Yeliz and Beidoglu (2009) and Waithaka (2015) argued that conflict has positive aspects: it helps individuals in knowing themselves, enhancing their awareness of others' characteristics, increases energy and motivation for

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problem solving, making life more interesting, and helps to solve small problems that could grow into big issues. However, Campbell, Carbally and Nustrand (1983), on the other hand, stated that conflicts are a normal segment of daily life; yet, it is considered as negative when it causes disagreements, stress, social chaos, destruction and violence between groups.

Interpersonal conflict, which involves value and/or personality differences arising from disagreements between individuals, is the core of this study. According to Gebretensay (2002, p. 56), interpersonal conflict might take various forms and manifest at various levels. It includes any overt and verbalised arguments or differences of opinion over any issue that could lead to a fight between students and between students and university leaders (Peter, 1996; Windle & Warren, 1999). Salleh and Adulpakdee (2012, p.16) added that interpersonal conflict may arise when wants, needs and beliefs between two or more parties/groups fail to coincide. In general, interpersonal conflicts are common in our day-to-day activities, which range from those at home, through organisations to nations (Nathan, 1996). If managed effectively, conflict can be constructive, if not; it can be a destructive for people and organisations (Sadowski, 1998).

Effective communication between individuals provides a foundation for preventing and resolving conflicts in a friendly and informal way. Janet (2015, p. 105) and Shahmohammadi (2014, p.632) argued that managing conflict and developing effective conflict resolution mechanisms encourages the development of values, attitudes and knowledge between individuals and organisations. Hence, conflict management skills are a fundamental aspect of leadership effectiveness in many organisations. For the purpose of this study, the definition of Olu and Abosede (2003) was adopted. This says that conflict management is a process of coordinating all resources through the processes of planning, organising, leading and controlling interpersonal conflicts in order to attain the objectives of organisations. **The implication is that conflict management should imply a change from destructive to constructive in the mode of interaction.**

Though students' interpersonal conflicts are very serious in many universities in Ethiopia in general and at Bahir Dar University in particular, no exhaustive and adequate studies were conducted in the latter university. Few studies such as Gidey (2000) studied traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution in Ethiopia. Likewise, Mulatu (2007) examined the conflict management practises at Admas University College. Abebaw (2014) studied students' conflict in relation to ethnic and religious diversity at Bahir Dar University. Yalew (2007) investigated causes of conflict and conflict resolution at Bahir Dar University. However, none of them dealt with where conflict is commonly practised (hot spot areas) in their studies. Besides, conflict-related issues are dynamic and need up-to-date information for a healthier teaching and learning process. Thus, this research tries to fill these gaps and add knowledge to the existing literatures in areas of conflict management styles. The general objective of the study was to assess interpersonal conflicts and styles of managing conflicts among students at Bahir Dar University. The specific objectives of this study include: First, to find out the causes of interpersonal conflict between students and administrative workers at Bahir Dar University, and second, to examine conflict management styles that are frequently practised by the university communities.

Research methods

Research design

There are different philosophies in research. Among others, positivism and post-positivism are the dominant philosophical thoughts throughout centuries. The present study was neither on the side of positivism nor post-positivism philosophical assumptions. Instead, the study employed a mixture of the two, which is called pragmatism (Creswell, 2009). This is due to the fact that pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality. However, it applies mixed-methods research composed of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Concurrent mixed-methods research was employed because quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and the results were embedded during the analysis. Questionnaires and key informant interviews were employed to collect the necessary information for the study.

Selection of sample sites and respondents

Regular undergraduate students ranging from first to third year on different campuses were included for the study. Multi-stage sampling techniques were employed to select the survey respondents to fill in the questionnaire.

First, there are five campuses at Bahir Dar University. With the objectives of making fair representations, all the campuses were included for this study (Table 1). This is due to the fact that the causes of conflict on different campuses might vary; the same is true in managing interpersonal conflicts. Second, based on the number of departments and the number of students, Social Science Faculty, Natural Science College, Behavioral and Educational College, Agriculture College, Business and Economics College, Institute of Land Administration and Bahir Dar Institute of Technology were selected purposively for the study. Third, using simple random sampling techniques, Department of Biology, Department of Civics, Department of Geography, Department of Curriculum and Educational Planning, Department of Disaster Risk Management, Department of Marketing, Institute of Land Administration and Department of Computer Engineering were selected for the study. Fourth, the sample sizes that could be taken for the study were determined using Kothari's (2004, p. 179) formula as it is shown below:

$$n = \frac{z^2.p.q.N}{e^2\,(N-1) + z^2.p.q}$$

Where,

n = sample size
z = the value of standard variant at 95% confidence interval (1.96)
p = the sample proportion (0.03)
q = is **1-p**
e = the estimate should be within 3% of the true value
N = the total number of regular students
n = 340

Fifth, taking into consideration representativity, the years of study of students in each department were selected using simple random sampling techniques (Table 1). Finally, 340 students were sampled for a questionnaire survey from eight departments using proportional stratified random sampling techniques based on the sampling frames obtained from each department. However, out of the total 340 questionnaires distributed to the respondents, 317 (93% of total) were returned for analysis.

Table 1. Number of respondents in each college, faculty, institute and department

College, faculty or institute	Name of department	Year of study	Total samples
College of Sciences	Department of Biology	II	37
Faculty of Social Sciences	Department of Civics	III	33
Faculty of Social Sciences	Department of Geography	I	57
College of Education and Behavioral Sciences	Department of Curriculum & Educational Planning	I	17
College of Agriculture	Department of Disaster Risk Management	II	36
College of Business and Economics	Department of Marketing,	I	35
Institute of Land Administration	Land Administration	III	24
Bahir Dar Institute of Technology	Department of Computer Engineering	II	37
Total			317

Data collection techniques

Primary data were collected using questionnaire and key informant interview. The questionnaire was organised in a mix of closed- and open-ended questions. It was tested as a pilot survey before the actual data collection. This helped to improve the quality of questions. Key informant interviews were conducted from 25 participants selected purposively from the whole target population. Issues raised during the discussions included excessive alcohol consumption, psychological acts, causes of interpersonal conflict and styles of conflict management. With the awareness of key informants, tape recording was employed to provide time to listen and to have eye contact with the participants.

Data analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were employed in this study. The information that was collected through key informant interviews and observations in relation to interpersonal conflicts and management styles of students were documented and analysed textually to substantiate the statistical results from the structured questionnaire. Upon completion of the quantitative data collection, the data were coded, edited and entered into SPSS and presented using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages and tables. Inferential statistics such as One-way MANOVA was employed to answer the following research questions: Do male students and female students differ in terms

of compromising, avoiding and collaborating in managing conflicts? Are females better adjusted than males in terms of compromising, avoiding and collaborating in managing conflicts? To answer these questions, one categorical independent variable (gender) and three continuous dependent variables (compromising, avoiding and collaborating scores) were employed. Normality, outliers, linearity, homogeneity and multicollinearity were checked and no significant violations were observed. Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) model of conflict management styles (competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating and compromising) were also used for data analysis.

Results

Causes of conflict among students at Bahir Dar University

As shown in Table 2, theft (95.3%), borrowing money (94.3%), and ethnic conflict (97.2%) were the major causes of conflict at Bahir Dar University. Key informants on different campuses added that religious and some ethnic songs such as *Tigrigna* were the main sources of conflict and quarrel on all campuses.

Table 2. Causes of interpersonal conflict among students at Bahir Dar University

Causes of Interpersonal Conflict	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Borrowing money/materials	299	10.7	94.3
Psychological problems	236	8.4	74.4
Political motivations	304	10.9	95.9
Religion-related issues	277	9.9	87.4
Sexual abuse	266	9.5	83.9
Theft	302	10.8	95.3
Taking too much alcohol	236	8.4	74.4
Ethnicity-based conflict	308	11.0	97.2
Interferences/intrusions	278	9.9	87.7
Total		100.0	883.0
Note: The total is not 100% because of multiple responses			

Key informants on different campuses added that religious and some ethnic songs such as *Tigrigna* in the dormitory were the main source of conflict and quarrel on all campuses. The study revealed that different music in different Ethiopian languages such as *Tigrigna*, *Oromigna* or *Gojamigna/Gonderigna* are vital sources of conflict between students, particularly in their dormitories. Key informants further added that claiming superiority of one ethnic group over another is also a main cause of conflict on all university campuses. In this regard, about 87% of the respondents showed their agreement. Key informants further informed that ethnic-based federal and political systems contributed to students' misconceived ethnic and political orientation, which resulted in ethnic conflict that

affected the intergroup relations among students in the university. Furthermore, lack of conflict resolution through discussions and lack of tolerance among members of different groups resulted in suspicion and mistrust, suspension of healthy communication, needless tension and development paralysis.

A question was asked of the respondents as to whether there is conflict between students or not. As shown in Table 3, about 70% of the respondents assured that there were serious conflicts between students. More importantly, the survey results evidenced that interpersonal conflicts were serious in College of Business Economics (FBE) followed by the main campus of the university. These results were in agreement with the document analysis made between 2014 and 2015.

Table 3. Students' opinion of the presence of conflicts among students at Bahir Dar University

Conflicts between students	Frequency	Percent
Yes	221	69.7
No	96	30.3
Total	317	100.0

Students were also asked to respond as to whether they observed quarrels between students and university police and/or leaders. About 54% of students responded that they had observed these situations. As far as gender is concerned, about 42% female and 58% male respondents confirmed the presence of these situations. Key informants were also asked to inform regarding the reasons behind these occurrences. Political affiliation, borrowing money, ethnic tension, sexual abuse, taking property without permission and interferences were the major causes of quarrels among students.

Gender and Interpersonal Conflict

During the survey, students were asked whether they were engaged in conflicts during their stay at Bahir Dar University. Accordingly, it emerged that about 70% of male respondents engaged in conflicts ranging from gossip to physical challenges against 30% of female students (Table 4). Key informants pointed out that female students were commonly engaged in gossip and insulting while male students commonly practised insulting and physical challenge. It was also noted that male students frequently create conflicts due to sexual harassment of female students.

Table 4. Gender and engagement in conflict (percentage respondents)

Response	Sex of respondents		Total
	Male	Female	
Yes	69.7	30.3	100.0
No	44.4	55.6	100.0
Total	61.8	38.2	100.0

Age and religion of students and interpersonal conflicts

This study investigated whether age of students has some effects on students' engagement in conflicts or not. As shown in Table 5, age and engagement in conflicts have inverse relationships. As age increases engagement in conflicts decreases as evidenced by the fact that about 63% of the respondents who were engaged in conflicts were aged between 15 and 25 against less than 2.5% above the age 26 years. As the key informants pointed out, greater age is directly related to greater ability to shoulder responsibilities and become cool in many ways.

Table 5. The relationship between religion, age, cumulative grade point and interpersonal conflicts

Religion	Orthodox	Protestant	Islam	Others	Total
Yes	74.9	63.6	14.3	66.7	71.9
No	25.1	36.4	85.7	33.3	28.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Respondents' age	15–20	21–25	26–30	36–40	Total
Yes	67.6	72.0	70.0	33.3	70.0
No	32.4	28.0	30.0	66.7	30.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

As shown in Table 5, students who were engaged in interpersonal conflicts were higher among those practising Orthodox religions (74.9%) followed by Protestants (63.6%). Key informants from FBE campus also substantiated the survey results. On the other hand, few key informants from main campus indicated that Orthodox religion is the source of conflict among students. The informant further indicated that some religious ceremonies such as *Mahiber* (religious association in the names of angels) is commonly practised in dormitories among Orthodox follower students, creating conflicts with Muslim and Protestant followers. According to information obtained from the students' representative, such conflicts decreased from time to time and many activities that create tensions between students have been dramatically reduced nowadays. However, under actual conditions it is quite the opposite.

Place of conflict (hot spot areas)

There are places where students commonly create conflicts. Knowing places where conflicts frequently occur will help university leaders to overcome the problems. In this regard, students were asked to indicate where conflicts commonly took place in the university. As shown in Table 6, dormitories and the gate of the campuses were places where conflicts frequently took place. Key informants strongly pointed out that TV rooms were sources of conflicts between students next to gate of the university. Many of the students in one way or another are supporters of one of the England football clubs. Inside or outside the campuses, supporters were also engaged in conflicts. As discussed in the previous topic,

different ethnic music with loud voices was the key source of conflict in the dormitory. As the key informants indicated, instead of solving conflicts through discussion, students try to solve them through insulting. Posting some pictures and writing religious proverbs on the walls of the café and/or dormitory were also sources of conflict on all campuses.

Table 6. Places frequently exhibiting interpersonal conflicts among students at Bahir Dar University

Options	Frequency	Percent
Dormitory	67	21.1
Cafe	16	5.0
Gate of university	130	41.1
Library	18	5.7
Lounge	29	9.1
Classroom	24	7.6
Others	33	10.4
Total	317	100.0

Interpersonal Conflict Managing Styles employed by University Students and Leaders

As key informants from different campuses indicated, conflicts between students and university police and among students have reduced from time to time. However, there are still some symptoms of the occurrence of conflicts among students and university leaders. As shown in Table 7, the majority of the respondents (58.1%) indicated that the involvement of guidance and counseling in managing conflicts was low, and only about 10% agreed to the presence of high involvements in these situations. Likewise, students responded that university leaders had a low level of involvement in minimising conflicts (55.2% of the respondents) (Table 7).

Table 7. The role of university leaders, police, and guidance counsellors in managing conflict at Bahir Dar University

Involvement	Options						Total	%
	Low	%	Medium	%	High	%		
University leaders	175	55.2	112	35.3	30	9.5	317	100
University police	111	39.4	150	40.8	56	19.8	317	100
Guidance counsellors	205	58.1	86	32.2	26	9.7	317	100

Using Thomas and Kilmann (1974) conflict management styles, five strategies were employed to collect data from the survey respondents. The strategies are forcing (obliging), accommodating (lose–win styles), avoiding (sidestepping), compromising (give and take), and collaborating (positive-sum styles). From the total respondents, only 67 students managed conflict situations using collaborating style (Table 8). The second style in terms

of frequency of utilisation was the compromising style (~34%). Significant numbers of students (about 40%) have used the avoiding style of managing conflict. However, the avoiding style of conflict management has its own disadvantages. It could progress from changing the subject of discussion to avoiding the person and finally keeping away from the relationship between the contestants.

Table 8. Scores of conflict management styles by students

Styles of conflict management among students				
Competing	Collaborating	Compromising	Avoiding	Accommodating
64(20.2%)	67(21.1%)	107(33.8%)	126(39.7%)	59(18.6%)

Results on multivariate analysis of variance

A one-way between-groups Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was performed to investigate gender differences in interpersonal conflict management styles. The result showed that there was a statistically significant difference between male and female students on the combined dependent variables: $F(3,161) = 13.7$, $p < 0.001$; Wilks' Lambda $= 0.83$; partial eta squared $= 0.173$. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the only differences to reach statistical significance, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.017, were compromising: $F(1,164) = 41.23$, $p < 0.001$, partial eta squared $= 0.173$. An inspection of the mean scores indicated that male students reported slightly higher avoidance ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.7$) than female students ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 0.3$).

Discussion

Discussions on interpersonal conflicts

At present, students' aggressive and violent behaviour in the university remains a significant threat to safe and secure learning environments. Among the many factors that impede the learning process, interpersonal conflicts among students, and between students and university leaders are by far the major ones. The types of interpersonal conflicts are many and manifested in different forms. Sany (2010), for example, indicated that the underlying causes of conflict in Côte d'Ivoire are multiple and complex, and include economic and political factors; however, politicisation of ethnicity was at the forefront. While the choice of the leadership of a community can be the source of conflict, religious and ethnic differences are the major causes of conflict in almost any heterogeneous community in Ghana and elsewhere (Anthony, 2012). Abebaw (2014, p. 144) in a study made at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia, indicated that the main cause of conflict in the dormitory was religious songs using mobile devices. Students who are highly ethno-centric reject others' religion, culture or ethnic groups because they considered them as contemptible and inferior (Mekonnen, 2013, p. 130). Abebaw (2014, p. 118) substantiated that superiority of one ethnic group over the other manifested through insulting was the major cause of conflict at Bahir Dar University.

In a broader context, Muhabie (2015, p. 32) stated that causes of conflict in the horn of Africa have emanated from their wildness and backwardness, radicalisation and religious fundamentalism. Similarly, Olu and Abosede (2003) indicated that misunderstanding of motives, personality clashes, poor administration, naughtiness (on the part of both staff and students) and sexual abuse were the major causes of conflict in many universities in Africa. A recent study made by Rahel, Negussie and Getnet (2013) added that sexual abuse (68%) was the major source of conflict between students in many schools in Addis Ababa. Results from qualitative analysis made by Yalew (2007, p. 35) identified that the major sources of conflict were ethnicity, religious diversity, defying rules, and sexual and love affairs, in order of importance. Ramani and Zhimin (2010) for their part noted that conflicts arise due to differences in individual capabilities, differences in social–cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, and differences in target goals among students in many universities in Africa.

Discussion on conflict management styles

As stated in the preceding discussions, students and the university community are engaged in different conflict management styles to smooth the teaching and learning process. Janet (2015) stated that conflict management skills are a fundamental and critical aspect of leadership effectiveness in many universities in Africa. In relation to this, the study made by Yalew (2007, p. 3) reported that the major conflict resolution styles among students were compromising, avoiding, mediating and dominating in order of importance. A previous study made by Betty (1998) in selected USA schools found that about 25% engaged in compromising and 26% in collaborating as major conflict management styles. Dincyürek et al. (2009, p. 1209) also added that compromising followed by collaborating were the most frequently used strategies for university students. Accommodating was the least frequently used strategy in handling conflicts. Shahmohammadi (2014) found that written warnings, reproaches, physical punishment and, in extreme cases, dismissal, are among common conflict management systems in many universities in dealing with students' violent behaviours.

A considerable number of research findings indicated that there is a difference between male and female students in handling conflicts. Kelly, James and Debra (2007), for example, in their correlation analyses, indicated that among high school and university students, males were involved in higher levels of physically aggressive strategies and lower levels of effective communication compared with females. A study by Kenneth and Thomas (2008, p. 18) showed that female students usually employ more mediating or avoiding strategies than actually engaging in conflicts. Kimberly, Mark, Emmeline, Kerrilynn and Hannah (2014) in their study noted that males argue and communicate more anger than females. This is due to the fact that males tend to display their powers when they feel irritated while females do not practise as such because they do not have such powers. Likewise, Yasin and Khalid (2015, p. 705) added that females tend to avoid conflicts significantly more than males.

Males commonly prefer styles such as forcing, problem solving, competing and dominating while female students, on the other hand, prefer smoothing, avoiding and compromising management styles (Waithaka, 2015, p. 2).

Scholars in the area of education stressed that conflict management styles differ between ages of students. Davis, Kraus and Capobiancom (2009) evidently stated that aged people are generally less likely to engage in destructive responses and more likely to avoid confrontations

In general, the major causes of interpersonal conflict and styles used to manage conflicts were discussed in-depth. The implication is that interpersonal conflicts are natural and should be managed to smooth the teaching and learning process. As observed in the field and from key informants' opinions, Bahir Dar University is facing challenges in relation to ethnic differences, religious acts and cultural differences. Unless these tribulations are managed, the university will face serious problems in addressing its major goals.

Concluding Remarks

The study examined the causes aggravating interpersonal conflicts and the role of conflict management styles for enhanced teaching and learning processes. The final goal of any university is to create a productive, collaborative and smooth environment for positive learning outcomes. However, there are cases where students are engaged in some interpersonal conflicts that create impediments in their day-to-day educational performances. From this study, it was learnt that ethnic differences, theft, drinking too much alcohol and insulting were the major causes of conflict in the university. The study also indicated that respondents commonly practise compromising, avoiding and collaborating strategies as measures of minimising conflicts.

Students do not come to Bahir Dar University with all the necessary social skills and experiences to cooperate with each other. Therefore, instructors, students, university leaders, campus police and students' guidance counsellors have to be aware of the real causes of conflicts and they have to create a dialogue on how to manage conflicts in the university. In general, the findings of this study could contribute towards enabling university instructors, administrators, campus police and students to manage interpersonal conflicts wisely and successfully in the achievement of Bahir Dar University's mission and vision.

Finally, this study is not free of limitations. Interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup and intra-group are commonly observed types of conflicts at Bahir Dar University. However, this study had focused on interpersonal conflicts. Besides, this study had been done in one university. It is believed that interpersonal conflicts could vary between universities. If other universities in different Regional States of Ethiopia are included, generalisation from the findings will be more sound and reliable. Therefore, future research has to consider those issues for the reason that conflicts might take various forms and manifest at different levels on a continuum.

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