

Full Length Research Paper

An investigation of conflict management in public and private sector universities

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The purpose of this paper is to gain an insight into the conflict management in public and private sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. To achieve the earlier mentioned purpose, survey method was used with the help of questionnaire. In this research, impact of university type (public and private sector) was examined on the conflict management strategies of the teachers in higher education. Moreover, a systematic approach was adopted to discover existence of conflict, its intensity, types and sources in these two types of universities. Results indicate that conflict was intense in the public sector universities; interpersonal conflict was more prevalent in public sector while task conflict was high in the private sector universities. Findings indicated that faculty in both types of universities used integrating, compromising and avoiding styles simultaneously in case of conflict. There was no significant difference in the conflict management strategies of both types of universities. Finally, it was revealed that there was no formal system in both types of universities to manage conflict.

Key words: Conflict, conflict management, conflict management strategies, public and private sector universities.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the research on conflict has been conducted in traditional organizations but it does not mean that educational institutions are free from it (Hearn and Anderson, 2002). Holton (1995) says that conflict is a part of academic life since time immemorial. In the view of Gmelch and Carrol (1991), conflict is "sewn into the fabric" of educational institutions due to functional, structural and relational characteristics of academic departments.

Miklas and Kleiner (2003) termed the educational institutions "a perfect breeding ground for conflict". Conflict is unavoidable in the institutions of higher education due to encouragement of academic freedom and unbridled thinking. Conflict can occur between students versus faculty, faculty versus faculty, faculty versus administrators and students versus students (Holton, 1995).

Folger and Shubert (1995) states that:

"Colleges and universities are no longer seen as quiet enclaves free from the conflicts that arise in all hierarchical organizations. . . . differences in goals or plans for the allocation of resources, misinterpretation or inconsistent application of institutional regulations, breaches of formal or informal contracts, power struggles and personal antagonisms are all possible sources of conflict".

The academic environment is different from other organizations. The teaching faculty is more independent and in direct control of their environment. Besides this independence there is a team-based approach to setting policies and executing program changes. It becomes difficult to force teaching faculty, with strong personalities and different philosophies, into accepting changes and the potential for conflict increases (Berryman-Fink, 1998). There are different client groups in the universities that is, students, teachers and administrators (Warters, 2000)

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and the potential for conflict increases among these three groups having claims on the ownership of the universities (Oster, 1995).

Browman (2002) states that conflict is a negative force and has no place in the academic environment. It is inseparable component of academic life and administrators spend more than 40% of their time on the management of conflicts in the universities (Stanley and Algert, 2007).

Conflict has been regarded as one of the key problem in the educational institutions. It can become an important tool in the development of the organization if it is managed well (Cetin and Hacifazlioglu, 2004) and despite the different image of conflict in different minds, the management of conflict is difficult (Algert and Watson, 2002).

According to Volpe and Chandler (1999), "conflicts on campus are growing in number, kind, and complexity. The current university context is clearly more challenging than in the past. The range of conflicts and the forums available for their management are much more far-reaching than ever before. In short, society has changed... and so has the university".

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public and private distinction in higher education

There are differences between public and private sector organizations and at the same time between employees' behavior of these organization. Public sector is typically service oriented and they are not competing with any other institution for profit but the goal of private sector especially business organization is to compete with other organizations and get maximum profit. Private sector managers' performance is also judged on the basis of profit maximization but public managers do not expect any material benefits for their performance (Halvorsen et al., 2005) which hamper their eagerness to take initiative or risks. Managers in the public sector do not perceive any rewards for their performance, so they are unwilling to exert their utmost efforts in order to achieve objectives. Moreover, public sector employees have secured jobs so they try to avoid their work (Baldwin, 1991; Bellante and Link, 1981; Brewer and Lam, 2009; Lewis and Frank, 2002).

Public sector organizations are characterized by many hierarchical layers, high degree of formalization and red tapism which are major sources of corruption and work delays in these organizations as people want to get expedite their work by using different illegal ways (Brewer and Lam, 2009; Buchanan, 1975; Frank and Lewis, 2004).

Public sector employees are highly unionized and these strong unions only care for labors interests even at the cost of organizational interests. All the earlier mentioned factors have brought public sector organizations to

the level that their survival has become a question mark.

Heffron (1989) has also distinguished between public and private organizations. He stated that public organizations are less inclined towards efficiency because they are dependent on the revenues from government. They need not worried about clients. Employees have to work under strict formal setting hence fewer chances for innovation and improvement. Public organizations have conflicting goals and objectives due to which a decision making becomes a difficult task. Moreover the performance measurement of public sector employees is also difficult due to the conflicting objectives.

As for as higher educational institutions in public and private sectors of Pakistan are concerned the picture is not different. As Munaf and Seema report from Hamid (2005):

"Private sector in Pakistan is more suitable regarding organization of tasks in the university. It is more efficient regarding the provision of directions to the staff and students, coordination, collection of reports for every activity of the organization and revision of curricula according to emerging global needs. It is also more favorable regarding the availability of quality assurance system".

Conflict perception

Hocker and Wilmot (1985) defined conflict as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals."

Some other definitions of conflict also suggest that perception play a vital role in the emergence and intensity of conflicts even in the absence of real differences. (Thomas, 1992; Kolb and Putnam, 1992). In the event of struggle between two interdependent parties, the perception of getting interference from one another is likely to invite conflict.

It is apparent from all these definitions that perception plays an important role in the conflict. Perception of conflict creates an atmosphere of animosity and hatred which leads to blockage of goal or interest of another. According to Marsh (1982), conflict is at maximum at public universities and in those universities where there is a high structural differentiation, more crowded campus and less innovation. Here in Pakistan, public universities are more crowded and there is a high structural differentiation in comparison to private sector universities, so faculty will perceive more conflict in public sector universities.

H₁: Faculty in public sector universities perceives more conflict than their counterparts in private sector universities.

Conflict intensity

According to Jehn (1995), conflict intensity is the amount of difference in the perspectives, thoughts and views about the tasks being performed among the workers. Intensity means the amount of costs and participation. Conflict intensity will be low if groups are better organized and structured (Dahrendorf, 2006). But according to Powell (1988), public organizations “located in environments in which conflicting demands are made upon them will be especially likely to generate complex organizational structures with disproportionately large administrative components and boundary spanning units”. It shows that public organizations are more complex and disorganized as compared to private organizations. Hence we can hypothesize that

H₂: Conflict is more intense in the public sector universities than private sector universities.

Types of conflict

Organizational conflict analysts have identified three different domains of conflict depending on the interpersonal relationship within group and that based around tasks developed by groups that is, relationship conflict, task conflict and process conflict (Amason and Schweiger, 1997; Cosier and Rose, 1977; Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954; Kabanoff, 1991; Jehn, 1995; Jehn, 1997; Rahim, 2000).

In a research study conducted by Guerra et al. (2005), it has been proved that public sector workers face higher level of task and relationship conflict than workers serving in private sector organizations. Keeping in view the research of Guerra et al. (2005), the study hypothesizes that:

H₃: Interpersonal and task conflict will be higher in public sector universities while process conflict will be higher in the private sector universities.

Sources of conflict

There are many sources of conflicts but the main sources are communicational factors, structural factors, personal factors and limited resources (Achoka, 1990; Holton, 1998; Van der Merwe, 1991). Keeping in view the difference in public and private sector universities, we hypothesize that:

H₄: Both kinds of universities have different sources of conflict.

Conflict management strategies

Conflict management style is someone's behavioral

pattern, which he tends to exhibit while facing a conflict (Moberg, 2001). Rahim and Bonoma (1979) have classified the conflict management on five styles based on two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. These five different styles of managing conflict are “competing, integrating, avoiding, obliging and compromising”.

Competing style represents high concern for self and low concern for others and identified with a win-lose orientation. Integrating style represents high concern for self and others and identified with a win-win orientation. Avoiding style represents low concern for self and low concern for others and identified with lose-lose orientation. Obliging style represents low concern for self and high concern for others and identified with a lose-win orientation. Compromising style represents intermediate concern for self and others (Rahim, 2000; Robbins, 2001).

According to Cetin and Hacifazlioglu (2004), private universities faculty use competitive style more than the faculty in public universities. While another study confirms that the public and private sector employees have the same approach regarding conflict resolution but employees in public sector are more inclined to adopt “integrating” strategy than their counterparts in the private sector (Brewer and Lam, 2009). Some other studies have proved that employees in both public and private sector uses “integrating” strategy to manage conflict with their subordinates, peers and supervisors (Rose et al., 2007).

Keeping in view the research of Brewer and Lam (2009), we hypothesize that:

H₅: There is a no difference in conflict management strategies used by faculty in both kinds of universities.

METHODOLOGY

The population of the project includes all universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa whether working in public or private sector excluding the engineering, medical, agriculture universities and Pakistan Military Academy. According to the Higher Education Commission (HEC, 2010) there are twenty four (24) universities in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The target population was 19 universities with eleven (11) universities working in the public sector and eight (8) working in the private sector in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Simple random sampling was done to select four universities. Two public sector universities were Peshawar University and Gomal University and two private sector universities were Qurtuba University and Sarhad University. After collection of data, the researcher coded it to facilitate quantitative analysis. All the analysis was done by using the SPSS 15 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences)

There are about 2025 teachers (male teachers = 1642, female teachers = 383) and 350 administrators in the higher education of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (HEC, 2004, 2005). A pilot study was undertaken for developing the research project. The study included 25 teachers and 15 administrators. The statistics from the study were then used for determining the sample sizes for teachers and administrators with the help of formula given at the bottom of Table 1.

In this study, the researcher used a self-designed, fixed-choice

Table 1: Determination of Sample Size

Pilot study (n)	N	SD	σ^2	SE(E) = σ/\sqrt{n}	E ²	Z@5%	Computed Sample Sizes
Teachers = 25	2025	0.73	0.5329	0.146	0.021316	1.96	92
Administrators= 15	350	0.69	0.4761	0.178157	0.03174	1.96	50
Formula used →	$[\sigma^2/((E^2/Z^2)+(\sigma^2/N))]$						

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Demographic characteristic	Frequency		Total	Percentage
	Public	Private		
Gender				
Male	81	38	119	83.8
Female	19	4	23	16.2
Designation				
Professor	20	7	27	19
Associate Professor	8	2	10	7
Assistant Professor	31	3	34	24
Lecturer	41	30	71	50
Experience				
0-10 years	41	31	72	50.7
10-20 years	19	3	22	15.5
20-30 years	37	6	43	30.3
30-40 years	3	2	5	3.5
Position				
Administrator	35	15	50	35.2
Teacher	65	27	92	64.8
Qualification				
PhD	36	10	46	32.4
MPhil	20	8	28	19.7
Master	44	24	68	47.9
Age				
20-35 years	38	29	67	47.2
35-50 years	32	5	37	26.0
50-65 years	30	8	38	26.8

questionnaire. A new questionnaire was developed with the help of conflict literature and questionnaires developed by various scholars (Rahim, 1983; Jehn, 1995; Balay, 2006). Three questions have been asked relating to each conflict management style, which are enough to measure reliability and enough to keep the attention of respondents. A five point Likert scale have been used. Questions have been asked about the perception, intensity, types, sources, styles of conflict and conflict management mechanism. The instrument was successfully used in the pilot study. Demographic characteristics of respondents are given in Table 2

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

H₁: Faculty in public sector universities perceives more

conflict than their counterparts in private sector universities.

Table 3 shows that conflict existed in both types of universities. But the faculty in public sector universities admitted the existence of conflict more unreservedly in their institutions than the private sector universities. Its t-value is 3.389 and the p-value is 0.001, on the basis of these values we accepted our hypothesis and concluded that there was significant difference in both types of universities in terms of conflict. Faculty in public sector universities perceived more conflict than private sector universities. Hence the hypothesis is accepted.

Table 3. t-test: Hypothesis 1

Variable	Group	N	Mean	S.D	df	t-value	p- value	Results
Conflict	Public	100	3.742	0.5623	140	3.389	0.001	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.385	0.5964				

Table 4. t-test: Hypothesis 2.

Variable	Groups	N	Mean	S.D	Df	t-value	p- value	Results
Intensity of conflict	Public	100	3.695	0.6431	140	2.191	0.030	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.429	0.7034				

Table 5. t-test: Hypothesis 3.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	S.D	df	t-value	p- value	Results
Interpersonal conflict	Public	100	3.455	0.822	140	2.279	0.024	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.119	0.747				
Task conflict	Public	100	3.470	0.658	140	-2.217	0.028	Hypothesis is rejected
	Private	42	3.738	0.655				
Process conflict	Public	100	3.380	0.763	140	-0.265	0.791	Hypothesis is rejected
	Private	42	3.417	0.723				

H₂: Conflict is more intense in the public sector universities than private sector universities.

Regarding the intensity of conflict, Table 4 shows that its mean was greater in the public sector universities. T-test confirms this having t-value 2.191 and p-value 0.030. So the hypothesis was significant in terms of intensity of conflict. It is concluded that intensity of conflict was higher at the public sector universities. Hence the hypothesis is accepted.

H₃: Interpersonal and task conflict will be higher in public sector universities while process conflict will be higher in the private sector universities.

The results in the Table 5 about the types of conflict in the public sector universities and private sector universities show that interpersonal conflict and task conflict have significant difference while the process conflict have no significant difference in both types of universities. The mean scores reveal that interpersonal conflict was higher in the public universities whereas task conflict was higher mean in private sector universities. The process conflict was slightly higher at the private sector universities but with no significance. Thus hypothesis is partially accepted.

H₄: Both kinds of universities have different sources of conflict.

Regarding the sources of conflict in both types of universities, it is clear from the mean scores and t-test in Table 6 that the difference is significant in all the four sources of conflict. Table 6 shows that personality factors, lack of communication and structural issues were the major sources of conflict while the limited resources were the main sources of conflict in the private sector universities. Hence the hypothesis is accepted.

H₅: There is a no difference in conflict management strategies used by faculty in both kinds of universities.

Table 7 shows the difference among the conflict management styles of faculty in both the public and private sector universities. The sequence of strategies used by both the public and private sector universities were the same that is, integrating, compromising, avoiding, obliging and dominating. There was no difference in the sequence of strategies they use. The difference between conflict management strategies in both the public and private sector, universities was insignificant. Hence the hypothesis is accepted.

Table 8 shows the presence of conflict management mechanism in the public and private sector universities. The affirmative response for the presence of mechanism is 43.7% and negative response is 56.3%. Mixed response indicates that either there was no such mechanism in both types of universities for the management of

Table 6. t-test: Hypothesis 4.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	S.D	df	t-value	p- value	Results
Personality factors	Public	100	3.890	0.906	140	2.464	0.015	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.476	0.930				
Lack of communication	Public	100	3.690	1.02	140	2.470	0.015	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.226	1.03				
Structural issues	Public	100	4.025	0.845	140	2.700	0.008	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.619	0.747				
Limited resources	Public	100	3.420	1.165	140	-2.282	0.025	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.822	0.854				

Table 7. t-test: Hypothesis 5.

Categorical variable	Groups	N	Mean	df	t-value	p- value	Results
Compromising	Public	100	3.78	140	-1.115	0.267	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.89				
Integrating	Public	100	4.04	140	-0.301	0.764	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	4.07				
Dominating	Public	100	3.24	140	-0.610	0.543	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.33				
Obliging	Public	100	3.53	140	-1.124	0.263	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.67				
Avoiding	Public	100	3.64	140	-1.694	0.093	Hypothesis is accepted
	Private	42	3.87				

Table 8. Frequency table for conflict management mechanism in universities.

Any mechanism of conflict	Public	Private	Total	Percentage
Yes	39	23	62	43.7
No	61	19	80	56.3

conflicts or the faculty was unaware about its presence.

When the faculty was asked about the specific conflict management mechanism in their respective universities, the response is given in Table 9. About the academic grievance procedure, 87.3% negated its presence. 95.8% faculty negated the hiring of ombuds-people, 100% faculty negated the hiring of conflict specialists, 99.3% negated the designing of conflict resolution courses for employees, 99.3% negated the establishment of dispute resolution centers, 100% faculty negated the hiring of psychotherapist, and 97.9% negated the presence of

conflict resolution training. Only 54.9% admitted the recruitment on the merit basis while 73.9% faculty admitted the fact that conflict is managed through experience on self help basis.

DISCUSSION

Perception of conflict

The results show that conflict is present in both kinds of

Table 9. Frequency table for specific conflict management mechanism.

Conflict mechanism	Response	Frequency		Percentage
		Public	Private	
Academic grievance procedure	Yes	13	5	12.7
	No	87	37	87.3
Ombudspeople	Yes	4	2	4.2
	No	96	40	95.8
Merit based recruitment	Yes	49	29	54.9
	No	51	13	45.1
Conflict specialists	Yes	0	0	0
	No	100	42	100
Conflict resolution courses	Yes	0	1	0.7
	No	100	41	99.3
Dispute resolution centers	Yes	0	1	0.7
	No	100	41	99.3
Psychotherapist	Yes	0	0	0
	No	100	42	100
Conflict resolution training	Yes	1	2	2.1
	No	99	40	97.9
People learn through experience	Yes	76	29	73.9
	No	24	13	26.1

universities. Faculty of both kinds of universities admits its existence in their respective institutions while the perception of conflict is higher in the public sector universities. It is due to the fact that public sector faculty enjoys more secured and permanent jobs than the contract based jobs in private sector universities. Contract jobs continue at the sweet will of the supervisor or head of the department, so the faculty in private sector universities try to focus on academic performance and cannot enjoy the privilege of opposition.

They may see conflict as threatening to their jobs. According to Balay (2006), private and public educational institutions are different in their functioning. Managers in private educational institutions are more independent in selecting their students and faculty, which leads to more homogeneous environment and lower level of incompatibilities.

The result is consistent with Guerra et al. (2005) who also confirmed that public sector organizations perceive a higher level of conflict in their working groups. He also contends that public sector employees have a high level of job security as compared to private sector due to which they are more involved in the conflicts.

Intensity of conflict

According to the second hypothesis, conflict is more intense in the public sector universities. According to Gmelch and Carroll (1991), "As the size of the institution increases, goals becomes less clear, interpersonal relationships more formal, departments more specialized, and the potential for conflict intensifies"

Public sector universities in Pakistan are large in size, interpersonal relationship are more formal and departments are more specialized, that's why conflict is more intense in these universities. While private universities are relatively small in size and have a simple structure. Moreover, it has homogeneous environment, so the conflicts here are not as much intense as in the public sector universities.

Types of conflicts in higher education

The third hypothesis proved that interpersonal conflict was higher in the public sector universities while task conflict was higher in private sector universities.

Table 10. Comparison between the present research and research of Brewer and Lam (2009).

Rank order	Research of Brewer and Lam (2009)	Present research
1	Integrating	Integrating
2	Compromising	Compromising
3	Obliging	Avoiding
4	Avoiding	Obliging
5	Dominating	Dominating

According to Jehn et al. (1999), private organizations have a clear objective to satisfy the client needs and earn profit. With a high goal orientation culture, disagreements about the task are a vital part of these organizations. Through task conflict, they improve their work and earn profits.

On the other hand, public organizations exist to provide services to the general public (Porter et al., 1975). They do not compete for clients and profit making is not their objective. So task conflict in these organizations means interpretation of policy, rules and regulations. Guerra et al. (2005) has found that workers in public organizations are more involved in interpersonal and task conflicts than the private sector employees.

Sources of conflict

Regarding the sources of conflict in both types of universities, personality factors, lack of communication and structural issues are the main sources of conflict in public sector universities while limited resources is the cause of majority of conflicts in private sector universities. Public sector universities in Pakistan are large in size and departments are spread over vast areas, hence lack of communication plays a major role in conflicts. While private universities are small in size and housed in single buildings. The teachers have no separate rooms or space, they are bound to sit in a single staff room so there is no such threat of intense conflict due to lack of communications. Similarly the faculty in public universities has secured jobs, so they face no threat of loss of jobs if engaged in personal clashes while in private universities the faculty enjoys no such privilege of security of jobs. They cannot afford to involve in personality clashes. Regarding the structural issues, the public sector universities are complex in nature, having a large hierarchical structure and chain of command as compared to private universities. So the structural issues also help in fanning the conflicts in public universities. Here in Pakistan, Private universities have limited resources and minimal assistance from Higher Education Commission, so the faculty struggles to get some share for their research funding and allocation of resources. Hence, Competition for scarce resources escalates the conflict in the private sector universities.

Conflict management strategies

The results show that there is no significant difference in the conflict management strategies of both public and private sector universities. The sequence of their conflict management strategies is also same in both types of universities. They use integrating, compromising, avoiding, obliging and then dominating. It shows that faculty in both types of universities are from the same background and same culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The results corroborates the finding of Brewer and Lam (2009) that rank ordering of conflict management strategies are the same between the public and private sector. There is a small difference in the rank order of preferred conflict management strategies between the Brewer and Lam (2009) research and the present research (Table 10).

It is due to the fact that the rank ordering of the present research is about general strategies of faculty members while the rank ordering of Brewer and Lam (2009) is related to conflict situations with their bosses.

Mechanism of conflict

It is a very disappointing situation that 56.3% faculty of both public and private universities saw no mechanism in their universities for the resolution of conflicts. Higher education being the most important area is lacking a mechanism for the management and resolution of conflicts in Pakistan. According to Volpe and Chandler (1999), higher education is facing innumerable conflict situations and without any alternative method, it can add oil to the already raging fire in hostile atmosphere. However conflict management is the less expensive and more efficient way of managing conflicts. In the western world, almost every university adopted one or the other mechanism for the management of conflict and disagreements.

Respondents were also asked about any specific mechanisms in their universities. Majority of faculty was unaware about any formal arrangement at the university level for the resolution or management of their conflicts. Even some Deans and Heads of departments were also unaware about the presence of any such mechanism in their institutions and asked from the researcher about the presence of such mechanisms. Faculty rated the

Table 11. Other conflict management mechanism.

Other mechanisms	Frequency
Head of Department decides the conflicts	3
Teacher Union decides the conflicts	4
Deans Committee decides the conflicts	2
Syndicate	1
Special committees are formed	1
Might is right	1

“learning through experience” as the highest mechanism for the resolution of conflicts. Responses about any specific conflict management mechanism in their respective universities have been summarized in Table 9. Some faculty members’ responses other than these mechanisms are given in Table 11.

Conclusion

This study provides educational administrators an opportunity to gain an insight about the situations prevalent in both types of universities. They should formulate appropriate policies and procedures for the management of conflict. We know that dispute resolution research has emanated from higher education but here in Pakistan no such mechanism exists in these universities. Faculty members resort to litigation and lawsuits in case of any conflicts or grievances. Now the time is ripe to gain insight from experiences of western universities in implementing a proper formal mechanism at the educational institutions through out Pakistan. Moreover, administrators should be trained to predict the origins of conflicts and must be able to skillfully manage emerging conflicts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are offered on the basis of our research findings:

- i. All the faculty members should be given awareness about the beneficial use of conflict management in their departments.
- ii. Conflict management training programs should be designed for the faculty in general and administrators in particular.
- iii. Faculty in both public and private sector universities should be taught conflict management strategies. This will surely boost their performance and minimize the deadly aspects of conflict.

LIMITATIONS

The data was obtained from one province in Pakistan that

is, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. So its findings can not be generalized to the whole public and private sector universities in Pakistan. Moreover, the findings are based on the responses to the questionnaire which may be different from actual behaviour.

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