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The Analysis of Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Approaches of University Students by Grade Level and Gender

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Abstract

Purposes of this study are to examine the interpersonal conflict solving approaches of university students and to detect whether these preferences changes according to grade level and gender. The sample of the study involves data obtained from 200 students from Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Faculty of Education in 2009-2010 academic year spring term. Survey is used as data collection method of the study and “conflict communication scale” made by Goldstein (1999) is revised to Turkish by Arslan,2005 as “interpersonal conflict solving approach scale” is used as scale instrument. According to this, interactions in conflict process consist of Confrontation, Public/Private Behavior, Emotional Expression, Conflict Approach/ Avoidance, Self-Disclosure approaches which focus on communication styles in communication process. ANOVA and t-test statistics analysis are made to investigate the alteration of students interpersonal conflict management approaches according to grade level and gender. Study results point out that “confrontation” approach scores are the highest and “Public/Private Behavior” approach scores are the lowest according to others. There are significant differences between “conflict approach/avoidance” approach

scores of first and fourth grade students and "Public/Private Behavior" approach scores between second and third grade and third and fourth grade students. When it was analyzed with the perspective of gender, it is concluded that there is a significant differences in favor of male students in approach scores of "Public/Private Behavior" and "confrontation".

Keywords: Conflict management, gender, grade level, interpersonal conflict, university students.

Introduction

In the literature, it appears that there is no consensus on the definition of the concept of conflict. This is because of the fact that conflict is not only field of management, but also fields of economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology and political science. (Korkmaz, 1994. p. 78) Besides, all the disciplines define conflict with their own terms. (Şahin, 2006,p. 15). Dictionary of Turkish Language Association defines conflict as "Mental condition of the individual whose requests and desires are equally attractive or opposing, and sad state of consciousness arising from the competition of wishes or desires which are incompatible with each other ". Conflict is not just a specific behavior of people. In addition, conflict can be defined as "disputes arising between two or more people or groups from various sources". No matter how it is defined, dispute, conflict, disharmony and opposition are the basic elements of conflict. " (Koçel, 2003, p. 664) .

Rahim generalizes these definitions of conflict and describes it as "the interaction process emerging as mismatch, dispute or disagreement between or in the social assets (individuals, groups, organizations, etc.)" (Rahim, 2002, p. 207). Although the definitions of conflict concept varies according to different authors, there is some commonality. (İpek,2000,p. 221).

These are,

1. Conflict is not static, but a dynamic process. ,
2. The conflict must be perceived by the parties.
3. Conflict has two dimensions with its positive and negative aspects.
4. Any conflict involves preference difficulty between two or more options.
5. There are frictions, conflicts and contradictions arise from different purposes, thoughts, ideas and so on in conflicts.

Interpersonal Conflict

Although interpersonal conflict is defined as a mismatch between the people, there is no generally accepted definition in the literature. However, we can define interpersonal conflict as "a phenomenon caused by negative emotional reactions to feel each other with the perception of interventions and consisting the situations of

conflict environmental (interdependence), cognitive (dispute), behavioral (blocking) and emotional (negative emotions) elements" (Barki and Hartwick, 2004).

Interpersonal conflict can be caused by various reasons. These reasons are mostly stem from personal, environmental, cultural or communicational bases. Conflict behavior basically comes from personal needs and interests, and these issues are surrounded by the factors of communication, emotions, past, structure and values. All these factors directly affect individual needs and interests, and also emerge as causes of conflict behavior influenced by the needs and interests (Moore , 2003, p. 64).

Conflict Resolution Approaches

Although there are a number of different approaches and models regarding conflict management styles, it is seemed that most of these studies are based on the studies of Blake and Mounon states that people are basically interested either in own or others aims in conflict management. This approach is known as "Dual Concern Model" in literature (Janssen vd. , 1996,p. 101). Many researchers used Blake and Mounon as baseline and developed different models. Thomas, in 1976, stated that individuals display either competitive behavior by considering their own interests and aims or collaborative behavior by thinking others expectations and gains during conflict. In this model, there are five conflict-handling styles based on two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. (Ma, 2005,p. 174; Sorenson etc. , 1999,p. 26). Along with same principals, Rahim also classified conflict management styles as unifying, oppressing or domination, benevolent and avoiding and compromising using the two dimension model mentioned above, (Rahim ve Bonoma, 1979; Rahim, 1983,p. 369). Hall (1973) described two dimensional behavioral patterns as win-lose, surrender-lose and compromise-synergy (Shockley-Zalabak, 1988,p. 304-305).

When the fact that interpersonal conflict is a reciprocal interaction process between parties, and this process is affected by a number of contexts such as, culture, environment, and personal structure in which people are in is taken in to consideration, role of communication in this process becomes even more prominent (Basım, Çetin ve Meydan 2009). In order to increase individual involvement in conflict process and parties' positions and behaviors, together with the outcome of the conflict communication process within the conflict need to be taken in to account (Goldstein, 1999). During a conflict, people display behavior and communication style, due to the environmental and personal factors. Goldstein (1999) developed a scale which focused on behavioral patterns of individuals within the conflict process. This scale is composed of 5 other sub-scales. This part of the study is based on this philosophy, it is comprised of communication ways that take into account individual's interaction through conflict process, such as confrontation, general/specific behavior, closing/avoiding, self-disclosure and emotional expression.

These are;

- a) **Confrontation:** First step in conflict resolution process towards eliminating conflict is the confrontation of the parties. In confrontation, cultural values among individuals are important, however confrontation itself plays an effective and important role.
- b) **General/Specific Behavior:** General behavior indicates people's comfort in environment and relaxed and easy going display with their attitudes. Specific behavior shows individuals either are not able to display their all behaviors or just able to present all within a particular/specific situation. This approach means that in terms of individual's behaviors displayed during conflict, feeling of comfort changes between the individual and cultural groups (Goldstein, 1999).
- c) **Emotional Expression:** Focal point of this approach is that expression of emotions in a comfortable manner during conflict process contributes to solution. Emotions are seen as energy which feeds conflict resolution as much as conflict itself (Bodtker ve Jameson, 2001). Most of the emotions can alleviate, prevent or control conflict.
- d) **Conflict approach/avoidance:** In this approach, how individual comprehend the situation of conflict has a great importance. For some, it can end up with constructive and positive results; on the other hand, some others perceive it just the opposite and they keep away from conflict. However, it needs to be stated that good will and tolerance are indispensable to reach effective and long-lasting solution.
- e) **Self-disclosure:** Individual's escape from the past experiences and steering his/her behaviors and attitudes without carrying prejudice and defensive emotions are important in conflict resolution process. Reaching results by this approach leads to constructive and positive results and helps individuals in making right decisions.

Method

This research, which aimed both to study the interpersonal conflict solving approach preferences and to detect whether these preferences change according to their grade level and gender, was conducted in general scanning model. In this context, the research problems are:

1. What are the interpersonal conflict solving approach preferences of students?
2. Is there a significant level of change between the students' interpersonal conflict solving approach and grade levels?
3. Is there a significant level of change between the students' interpersonal conflict solving approach and genders?

Sample

200 students from Mehmet Akif Ersoy University Faculty of Educational Science constitutes the sample of this research, which was conducted in 2009-2010 academic year fall term. Distribution of grades and gender of students are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Student Level and Gender Distributions

Gender	Grade			
	1. Grade	2. Grade	3. Grade	4. Grade
Female	45	45	19	15
Male	20	27	14	15
Total	65	72	33	30

Data Collection Tool

Interpersonal Conflict Solving Scale was used as a data collection tool in this research. The originally named as **Conflict Communication Scale** and was developed by Goldstein (1999) was adapted to Turkish by Arslan (2005). The original scale had 75 items including sub-factors like confrontation, public/private behavior, emotional expression, approach/avoidance and self disclosure. Received high scores from each factor, respectively, shows that parties faced more in the conflict processes, disclosed themselves, displayed emotional expression, demonstrated the general behavior and approached to conflict.

In their research, Basım, Çetin and Meydan (2009) examined the scale in terms of structure of validity; by preferring the best explaining items that describes scale factors, items whose factor loadings were under . 40 were removed from the scale. Thus, by defining the items that best describes created model, the validity of the scale structure was attempted to enhance. Factor loadings of items for the final version of the 43 point scale change between . 40 and . 67, and 49, 34% of total variance can be explained by this model. Cronbach alpha reliability values of confrontation factor is . 71, public/private behavior factor is . 77, approach/avoidance factor is . 78, self disclosure factor is . 71 and emotional expression factor is . 75. According to above data, it can be said that scale is valid and reliable. (Basım, Çetin ve Meydan, 2009). 43-item "Interpersonal Conflict Solving Scale" which was rearranged by Basım, Çetin and Meydan (2009) was used in this study. The scale was arranged in 7 likert type (1= Strongly Disagree, 7= Totally Agree).

Data Analysis

This study was conducted primarily on descriptive statistical analysis regarding students' preferred approach to interpersonal conflict resolution. ANOVA statistical analysis was performed in order to test whether preferences of the students who participated in the study more than the grade level of interpersonal conflict resolution

approaches differed significantly. To determine the grades between which the differentiation was detected, LSD comparison test (Least-significance difference) was applied. To determine whether some differentiation existed in Students about preferences on interpersonal conflict resolution approach according to their gender, t-test was applied for independent groups.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented below with the scope of research problems.

1. How is the preferred approach of students on interpersonal conflict resolution?

The mean score of descriptive statistics on interpersonal conflict resolution related to public / private behavior, emotional expression, approach / avoidance and self-disclosure sub-factors of students are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics Results of the Students' Average Score Regarding Interpersonal Conflict Resolution

Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Approaches	N	Avg.	sd
Approach/Avoidance	200	3,640	,9944
Self-Disclosure	200	4,495	,8431
Public/Private Behavior	200	3,361	1,341
Confrontation	200	5,313	,8015
Emotional Expression	200	5,490	,9587

When the Table 2 is evaluated according to the scope of the first problem, interpersonal conflict resolution approaches of "emotional expression" sub-factor mean score (5. 490) was the highest, "general behavior" sub factor mean score (3. 361) was the lowest. In this context, it can be said that the students displayed more emotional expression of the conflict process, meanwhile they exhibited less overall behavior.

2. Is there a significant differentiation between the students according to their grade levels and their interpersonal conflict resolution approaches preferences?

Descriptive statistical results according to the students' prefer on interpersonal conflict resolution approaches with the grade level are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Results of Students' Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Approaches According to Grade Level Preferences.

Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Approaches	Grade	N	Avg.	Sd
Approach/Avoidance	1. Grade	65	3,401	1,001
	2. Grade	72	3,695	,988
	3. Grade	33	3,666	1,008
	4. Grade	30	3,997	,891
Self-Disclosure	1. Grade	65	4,423	,646
	2. Grade	72	4,390	,947
	3. Grade	33	4,636	,900
	4. Grade	30	4,744	,860
Public/Private Behavior	1. Grade	65	3,213	1,258
	2. Grade	72	3,581	1,333
	3. Grade	33	2,883	1,431
	4. Grade	30	3,681	1,303
Confrontation	1. Grade	65	5,317	,774
	2. Grade	72	5,398	,746
	3. Grade	33	5,107	,980
	4. Grade	30	5,329	,770
Emotional Expression	1. Grade	65	5,564	,935
	2. Grade	72	5,428	1,004
	3. Grade	33	5,519	,796
	4. Grade	30	5,442	1,085

ANOVA statistical analysis was performed in order to test whether the choice of students with interpersonal conflict resolution approaches differed significantly depending on grade level. Analysis indicated while average scores of students taken from "approach / avoidance" and "general behavior" sub-factors significantly differed according to grade level, "Self-Disclosure," "Confrontation" and "Emotional Expression" sub-factors average scores did not differentiate according to grade level. One of the most commonly used multiple comparison test Least-significance difference (LSD) (Bayram, 2004, p. 101) was applied to determine in which grade

level differentiation has occurred. One factor ANOVA test results which students' average of scores compared according to the grade level are given in Table 4

Table 4. One Factor ANOVA Results Analysis Score Averages of Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Approaches According to Grade Level.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Source of Difference
Approach/ Avoidance	Intergroup	7,770	3	2,590	2,685	,048*	A-D
	In-group	189,045	196	,965			
	Total	196,815	199				
Self- Disclosure	Intergroup	3,642	3	1,214	1,726	,163	
	In-group	137,835	196	,703			
	Total	141,476	199				
Public/Private Behavior	Intergroup	15,523	3	5,174	2,961	,033*	B-C
	In-group	342,514	196	1,748			C-D
	Total	358,037	199				
Confrontati on	Intergroup	1,922	3	,641	,997	,395	
	In-group	125,941	196	,643			
	Total	127,863	199				
Emotional Expression	Intergroup	,731	3	,244	,262	,853	
	In-group	182,188	196	,930			
	Total	182,919	199				

(A: 1 Grade, B: 2. Grade, C: 3. Grade, D: 4. Grade), * $p < ,05$

When Table 4 is examined, it is observed that students' "approach / avoidance" point averages as differentiate statistically significantly according to grade level. Average scores for "approach/avoidance" were 3. 401, 3. 695, 3. 666, and 3. 997 for first, second, third, and fourth grade students, respectively. It is seen that the difference between first and fourth grades were in favor of the first grades in LSD analysis.

According to Table 4, it is observed that students' overall behavior points averages differentiated statistically significantly according to grade levels. The average "general behavior" scores were 3,213, 3,581, 2,883, and 3,681 for first, second, third,

and fourth grade students, respectively. In LSD analysis it is seen that this differentiation was in favor of the second-grades among second and third grades and was in favor of fourth grades among third and fourth grades.

3. Is there a significant level of differentiation between the students' preferences of interpersonal conflict resolution approaches and the gender?

T-test was applied for independent groups to determine whether students interpersonal conflict resolution approach preferences differed according to gender participating in the study and the results are given in Table 5.

Table 5. T-Test Results for Independent Groups about Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Approaches according to Gender of Students.

Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Approaches	Gender	N	Avg.	S	df	t	p
Approach/Avoidance	Female	124	3,299 1	,90893	198	- 6,88 5	,000*
	Male	76	4,197 4	,87315			
Self-Disclosure	Female	124	4,472 2	,81719	198	-,487	,627
	Male	76	4,532 2	,88821			
Public/Private Behavior	Female	124	3,048 4	1,24698	198	- 4,40 7	,000*
	Male	76	3,872 2	1,34064			
Emotional Expression	Female	124	5,375 4	,77209	198	1,39 1	,166
	Male	76	5,213 5	,84303			
Emotional Expression	Female	124	5,561 1	,90078	198	1,34 2	,181
	Male	76	5,374 1	1,04223			

*p<,05

According to the analysis results given in Table 5, students' interpersonal conflict resolution approaches sub-factor of "self-disclosure", "face" and "emotional expression" average scores do not differ significantly according to gender. In addition,

it is seen that there is significant differentiation in favor of male students compared to female students on "approach / avoidance" point averages ($t_{198}=-6,885$, $p<0,05$). Similarly, it is seen that there is a significant difference in favor of boys between male and female students' "general behavior" point averages ($t_{198}=-4,407$, $p<0,05$). According to the findings, male students "approach / avoidance" and "general behavior" score averages significantly differentiate according to female students, "self-disclosure", "face" and "emotional expression" average scores did not differ significantly according to gender.

Conclusions

This study was conducted to explore the university students' interpersonal conflict resolution preferences and investigated whether the preferences differ or not according to a grade level and gender. Findings show that the students are generally preferring the emotional approach and the common approach is less preferable one in interpersonal conflicts. Emotionality can be considered as one of the positive and constructive approaches to conflict resolution. In this context, a sincere sadness can ease conflicts, prevent it, or can play an active role in the conflict resolution process in this respect. (Basım, Çetin ve Meydan, 2009)

Another result obtained from the research is that: while the expression point averages of university students on sub dimensions "Self-Disclosure", "Confrontation" and "Emotional Expression" do not differentiate significantly there seems to be a significant level of differentiation in "Approach / Avoidance" and "Public Private Behavior" sub dimensions at grade level. In the "Approach / Avoidance sub-factor this differentiation is in favor of the fourth grades between the first and fourth grade students. In the "Public Private Behavior" sub-factor, differentiation is in favor of the second grades between the second and third grade students and in favor of the fourth grades between the third and fourth grade students.

"Approach/Avoidance" is how individuals approach to what they perceive as a general conflict and conflict resolution processes. While some of the people see conflicts natural, inevitable even in some cases as an opportunity for development and have positive perceptions to it, some of them discern such a situation should be avoided, as it is perceived negatively. Besides achieving effective and constructive solutions for conflict, not avoiding conflict; anticipates the approach to conflict. (Basım, Çetin ve Meydan, 2009)

In this respect, there seems that first grades prefer to avoid conflict more than fourth grade students. The reason of this situation might be due to the fourth grade students' longer period of education at the university. When the findings are evaluated in terms of gender; while the students "approach / avoidance" and "general behavior" mean scores differentiate significantly in favor of male students, the mean scores of "self-disclosure", "confrontation" and "emotional expression" do not differentiate meaningfully between male and female students. This result might be interpreted as

while male students are adopting confrontation in conflict female students are avoiding from confrontation. The literature review revealed some studies with different results. It was stated that, while female employees avoid conflict in the business environment and exhibit cooperative attitudes in the home, males exhibit a more cooperative attitude in the work environment in the contrary (Chusmir ve Mills, 1989). In another study, it was stated that while females prefer avoidance approach, males prefer dominance approach in conflict resolution process. (Brewer etc. , 2002).

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