The Road Less Travelled: Informal Conflict Management Practices in Syrian Higher Education Institutions

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Research Domains

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Abstract

In the complex landscape of higher education institutions (HEIs), conflict is widespread and is addressed across policy and practice. However, ambiguities in formal conflict management guidelines in some contexts may force academics to employ adaptive strategies. This study explores the informal conflict management strategies adopted by academics in Syria in the absence of clear institutional policies and well-defined roles, through a Foucauldian analysis of power and subjectivity formation. Employing qualitative methods including interviews and diaries, the study uncovers how academics navigate institutional lacunae by resorting to personal negotiations and informal practices such as gossip and avoidance. These approaches not only help academics manage conflicts but also influence the construction of knowledge and identities within this precarious academic setting. By highlighting these strategies, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the micro-politics within the academic profession and how academics adapt to and shape their professional environment amidst institutional ambiguities.

Full paper

Introduction

Where formal conflict management policies do not exist or are not clearly defined, academics may be forced to resort to adaptive informal strategies, as in Din et al.'s (2011) study suggests. This paper, based on a study of Syrian higher education (HE), explores informal conflict management strategies through a Foucauldian lens (Foucault 1977a, Foucault 1977b, Foucault 1977c), examining the ways in which academics navigate and shape their institutional environments. By focusing on power dynamics and identity formation, this research provides insights into how academics employ adaptive informal conflict management techniques to compensate for deficiency in relevant policy. This deficiency is obvious in the two legal frameworks, namely The University Regulation Law (2006) and Presidential Decree No.36 (2001), that govern the work of public and private universities. These frameworks notably lack

provisions for addressing conflicts within universities. By employing informal adaptive techniques, academics also contribute to the construction of institutional knowledge and practice.

Literature Review

While the literature on conflict management in HE delineates a full range of formal and informal conflict management processes within higher education institutions (HEIs) (e.g. Berryman-Fink 1998), there is an obvious preference of informal and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) strategies (Gmurzyńska 2021a, 2021b). The preference is usually justified by their relative low cost in comparison with formal judicial and legal processes, their alignment with universities' stated values, and their potential to preserve collegiality (Gmelch 1998, Rieger 1999, Warters 2000, Katz 2017, Katz et al. 2018). From a more critical perspective, Ahmed's (2021) use of the concept of non-performativity suggests that institutions may opt for informality to superficially address conflict without disrupting the status quo. In this paper, I use the term informality to describe adaptive strategies that academics use in the absence of policies and well-defined conflict management procedures.

Methodology

Employing a qualitative framework, this study utilises interview and diary data collection methods in combination with discourse analysis, guided by Foucault's theories on power and governance (Foucault 1977a, Foucault 1977b, Foucault 1977c). Participants in the study are 23 academics who teach/have previously taught in Syrian HEIs. The semi-structured interviews captured the academics' overall subjective experiences as they navigate conflicts through adaptive informal conflict management, while the solicited diaries provided an exploration of how they make sense of their experiences in their day-to-day conflict-related interactions and how conflict develops over time.

Findings

All participants stated the absence of clear policies or pre-described procedures regarding conflict management in Syrian HEIs. The findings also reveal that academics frequently employ informal practices such as personal negotiations, reliance on gossip, and strategic non-engagement. For example, one participant imagined conflict as a group of academics sitting closely to each other, whispering in a closed office. Another commented, "When the situation became too stressful and I knew nothing was going to change, I just left the office and did nothing about it" (diary entry). Such strategies serve multiple functions: maintaining professional relationships, navigating institutional hierarchies, and safeguarding personal and collective interests, all of which are exemplified in a comment by an early career academic, "I am still a PhD student [as well as being a lecturer] and I don't want my relationship with the other lecturers to be impacted, so I prefer not to raise any problems to the head" (interview). The Foucauldian perspective frames these strategies as forms of resistance to or normalisation of the power dynamics, influencing the academics' subjectivities, and revealing how they actively participate in the redefinition of their professional landscapes.

Discussion

This discussion reflects on the implications of finding that informality in conflict management is an important form of resistance within HEIs. The absence of formal policies, which may be perceived as a lack of governance, is reinterpreted here as a specific form of *governance itself*, one that facilitates certain types of power relations and behaviours. These informal practices, by filling the gaps left by institutional deficiencies, become ingrained in the fabric of academic life, shaping not only individual strategies but also collective understandings and responses to conflict.

Conclusion

The adaptability of Syrian academics highlight the critical role of informal conflict management practices in shaping academic environments under conditions of deficiency of policy and procedures. Recognising these practices as forms of resistance and manifestations of technologies of the self (Foucault 1988) challenges traditional understandings of conflict management. This shift calls for a new view of conflict in HEIs through the lens of power dynamics in day-to-day interactions. This approach considers the unique circumstances of the individuals involved, the institutional realities, and the broader contextual environment.

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