Compassion and Agency in Conflict: Syrian Academics Negotiating Institutional Discourses in Higher Education

Fatima Alhaj Hasan
University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Conflict in universities is often framed within higher education institutional discourse as disruptive and unprofessional. Drawing on Foucauldian concepts of power/knowledge, this study investigates how academics in Syrian higher education institutions (HEIs) experience and frame conflict in contexts where formal mechanisms for managing conflict are limited or absent. Using interview and diary data, the study explores how institutional discourses position conflict as something to be avoided, while uncovering moments when academics exercise agency to frame and handle conflict differently. Compassion, while not a dominant discourse, emerges at key moments—not in the absence of conflict, but in how it is navigated: choosing to set tensions aside during times of vulnerability, extending care despite tensions, or aligning with ethical principles. These findings complicate dominant institutional framings of conflict and highlight how academics improvise strategies that blend resistance, professional survival, and, at times, acts of solidarity and care within challenging environments.

Full paper

Introduction

In many HEIs, conflict is framed as a threat to collegiality, professionalism, or productivity (Barsky 2002). In settings lacking formal conflict management structures, this framing reinforces a logic of avoidance or silence. This paper draws on Foucault's concept of power/knowledge (1980) —to explore how Syrian academics navigate conflict in institutions where relevant formal policies are lacking. Dominant discourses often construct conflict as disruptive or inappropriate. Yet the data reveal moments where academics reframe or handle conflict with compassion – not by eliminating disagreement, but by managing it with care, restraint, or ethically-based alignment. These moments challenge narrow institutional framings of conflict, revealing how power and agency are exercised in less visible but significant ways.

Literature review

Much of the literature on organisational conflict has focused on behavioural styles and prescriptive management approaches (Rahim&Bonoma 1979; Berryman-Fink 1998). While informal and context-sensitive strategies are increasingly recognised (Gmurzyńska2021a, 2021b), emotional and ethical dimensions of conflict remain underexplored. Foucault's power/knowledge (1980) offers a critical lens for examining how institutional discourses construct certain truths about conflict—what counts as a "problem," and how it should be handled. Within these norms, academics may still find ways to act, resist, and even show care.

Rather than assuming conflict is inherently negative or positive, this paper examines how it is discursively framed and navigated. It highlights small, meaningful acts—such as a gesture of care during illness—as moments when compassion appears, not as the dominant discourse but as a strategy for managing institutional tensions or expressing ethical alignment.

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative data from 23 Syrian academics, collected through semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries. A Foucauldian discourse analysis approach guided by Foucault's theories on power and governance (1977a, 1977b, 1977c, 1980) was used to examine how participants framed and made sense of conflict, focusing on language, positionings, and institutional logics that shaped their responses. Interviews provided reflective accounts of past conflicts, while diaries captured everyday negotiation of conflict dynamics.

Findings

Participants' accounts reflected discourses framing conflict as something to be avoided or quietly endured. Participants often described a culture of silence around conflict, reinforced by professional norms and fears of reputational or professional harm. One academic noted, "I don't like to hear that there's conflict between one academic and another, and if there is, I feel kind of ashamed… we are the most elite class in society" (interview). Another stated, "We shouldn't waste time on personal disagreements. What we care about here is work. Leave personal disagreements outside" (interview).

However, academics also described moments where they navigated conflict differently to these dominant framings. In one case, two colleagues in conflict embraced after one

assisted the other during illness: "We hadn't spoken for long. But after I saw her vomiting in the bathroom and offered help, she asked me to speak outside the office, where we discussed the issue" (diary entry). In another, an academic refused to side with a senior academic against a, stating, "[the student] followed his supervisors' instructions... I couldn't fail him" (interview).

These moments do not suggest compassion dominates academic responses to conflict. Rather, they show that even within highly politicised, hierarchical, and constrained contexts like Syrian universities, academics exercise care—toward others, ethical principles, and themselves—while navigating conflict.

Discussion

Foucault's power/knowledge concept suggests that dominant institutional discourses define acceptable knowledge or behaviour. In Syrian HEIs, conflict is frequently positioned as private or disruptive, to be avoided or suppressed. This framing is part of a broader disciplinary regime encouraging conformity and self-regulation, particularly in politically sensitive or resource-scarce contexts.

Yet academics are not passive recipients of these discourses. They resist, and sometimes reframe conflict as an opportunity to act with integrity or care. Acts such as refusing complicity, offering support in a moment of need, or choosing silence to preserve relationships are shaped by power and they also express agency. Compassion here emerges not a sentiment on top of conflict but a practice within it, even briefly.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to reframing conflict in higher education as a dynamic shaped by institutional power, discourse, and individual agency. In Syrian HEIs, where formal conflict procedures are lacking and hierarchies rigid, academics demonstrate that conflict can be navigated with care, solidarity, and ethical stance. While compassion is not the dominant discourse, it surfaces when individuals choose how to act—to resist, complicate, or soften institutional norms. Recognising these practices broadens our understanding of conflict, opening space for more context-sensitive ways of thinking about collegiality in higher education.