

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE INCIDENCE OF CONFLICTS IN ORGANIZATIONS: AN EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Conflict management is an issue with constant relevance to organizations, but it has taken on new dimensions in the context of the unprecedented global health, social and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to adapt their conflict management practices to the new realities, organizations need to be aware of the effects of the global crisis on the level of conflicts.

The purpose of the study is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the occurrence of conflicts in Bulgarian organizations. More specifically, it aims to explore changes in the overall level of conflicts in organizations and the level of interpersonal conflicts to which surveyed employees were involved. The data were collected in April and May 2021 using an online questionnaire in Google forms. The sample consisted of 708 full-time employees from different organizations in Bulgaria.

Findings show that employees assess the overall incidence of conflicts in organizations as not very common due to remote work and lack of direct observations of the working process. When it comes to personal conflicts of employees, the number of reported conflicts increases. Majority of respondents either have experienced an isolated dispute or are still having an ongoing difficult relationship with another member of the organization in the last year. Of the two types of conflicts studied, the ongoing difficult relationships are less common during the pandemic. Although the ongoing conflicts are relatively rarely reported, they indicate the existence of serious and probably more intense conflicts with all the potentially negative effects on the employees involved, the team and the organization. Managers are more likely than employees to be involved either in an isolated dispute or in an ongoing conflict as an active party during the pandemic. Findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has not have a significant impact on the incidence of disagreements in the workplace, both at the overall and personal level, as most employees deny witnessing or experiencing more conflicts in the last 12 months than before the crisis. When reported, the increase in the incidence of conflicts is greater at the overall level than at the level of interpersonal conflicts with co-workers.

In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the study has several implications for organizations. First, organizations face the challenge of finding appropriate tools to eliminate or limit the negative effects of the pandemic on employees' relationships. Second, another challenge is to create a healthy and psychologically safe working environment for each employee. Finally, today more than ever, organizations need to provide adequate conflict management training to employees, especially managers, in order to develop their ability to deal with disagreements in the new dimensions of the workplace.

The study provides original findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the incidence of conflicts in organizations, contributing to a better understanding of the under-researched area of the effects of the health crisis on organizational life.

Keywords: COVID-19, conflicts in organizations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict management is an issue with constant relevance to organizations, but it has taken on new dimensions in the context of the unprecedented global health, social and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in the early 2020, employers have faced unexpected difficulties and challenges in ensuring a safe and healthy work environment. Restrictions and epidemiological measures imposed at the national and organizational level to stop the spread of the virus have generated drastic changes for employees. Working practices were radically disrupted, and employees had to adapt to working from home. In addition to the serious risk of infection, the crisis poses a significant threat to the well-being of employees in organizations due to social distancing, loneliness, stress, depression, etc. (Kniffin et al, 2020). All these factors affect workers' perceptions, attitudes and emotions and can result in manifestations of negative behaviours at work which can become a key source of conflicts. In order to adapt their conflict management practices to the new realities, organizations need to be aware of the effects of the global crisis on the level of conflicts.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on organizational conflict have not been studied in detail and research is yet to be carried out. However, there is considerable empirical evidence of the effects of severe economic crises, such as the COVID-19 recession, at the level of individual actors, including the experiences and views of managers and

workers (Johnstone, Saridakis, & Wilkinson, 2019). Economic crises are considered a threatening contextual circumstance that affects employees' approaches in life and evaluations of their work situations (Markovits, Boer, & van Dick, 2013). Economic downturns generate a diverse range of negative consequences for workers (victims, survivors, and executioners) (Gandolfi & Hansson, 2011). The biggest adverse effects are for the so-called "survivors" of downsizing activities who keep their job but may still be affected by changes to employment practices and job demands in the medium to long term (Johnstone et al, 2019). Employees might experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety, anger, job insecurity, distrust towards management, lack of motivation or desire to leave the organization (Brockner, Grover, Reed, & DeWitt, 1992; Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1991; Johnstone et al, 2019; Kinnie, Hutchinson, & Purcell, 1998; Littler, Wiesner, & Dunford, 2003; Mehri, Iqbal, Hekmat, & Ishaq, 2011; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1997; Sverke & Hellgren, 2001). All this might manifest in dysfunctional employee behaviours including absenteeism (Gandolfi, 2005), turnover (Brockner, 1988), lowered productivity (Kinnie et al, 1998), as well as increased levels of conflicts and lowered speed of conflict resolution (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1991; Hansson, 2008). In brief, previous research suggests economic crises can increase the level of conflict in organizations.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis may have a different effect on the frequency of conflicts than economic crises due its uniqueness. The main factor for potential differences is the major changes in the work environment that led to forced isolation from colleagues. Significantly increased remote work does not provide direct contact with co-workers (Dolot, 2020). Results of a study on organizational conflict management during the pandemic in Azerbaijan indicates that the total number of conflict cases has decreased during the pandemic due to the changes in the working routine (Nadjafova, Paresashvili, Maisuradze, & Nikvashvili, 2021). Work from home has limited direct interactions between employees and reduced the incidents of conflict. The results of the study also suggest that the pandemic has made workers more empathetic and collaborative in resolving conflicts.

Given the insufficiency of empirical evidence for the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace conflict, it seems necessary to study how the global health crisis affected employees' behaviour and their relationships.

The aim of the paper is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the incidence of conflicts in Bulgarian organizations. More specifically, we will look at changes in the overall level of conflicts in organizations as well as in the level of interpersonal conflicts to which surveyed employees were a party.

The current study provides original findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to a better understanding of the under-researched area of the effects of the health crisis on organizational life.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current paper is part of a research project on workplace conflict in organizations in Bulgaria. The data were collected in April and May 2021 using an online questionnaire in Google forms. The main section of the questionnaire included questions about the occurrence of conflicts in organizations, as well questions about the individual interpersonal conflicts of the employees during the pandemic. The overall incidence of conflicts in organizations was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 – Strongly disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 – Neither agree nor disagree; 4 – Agree; 5 - Strongly agree). Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that conflict in their workplace was a common occurrence. The incidence of interpersonal conflicts with another member of the organization in the last year was measured with a five-point scale (1 – None (0), 2 – 1, 3 – 2, 4 – 3, 5 – 4 or more). Two types of conflicts have been studied: isolated dispute and ongoing difficult relationships. Respondents were asked to assess whether they had witnessed more conflicts in the organization and whether they have had more conflicts with other members of the organization in the last 12 months than before the COVID-19 pandemic on a five-point Likert scale (1 – Strongly disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 – Neither agree nor disagree; 4 – Agree; 5 - Strongly agree). The questionnaire included a section that aimed to gather information on the demographic characteristics of respondents (such as gender, age, educational background, years of work experience and type of position in the organizational hierarchy) and the characteristics of the organizations (such as type of settlement, sector, and size).

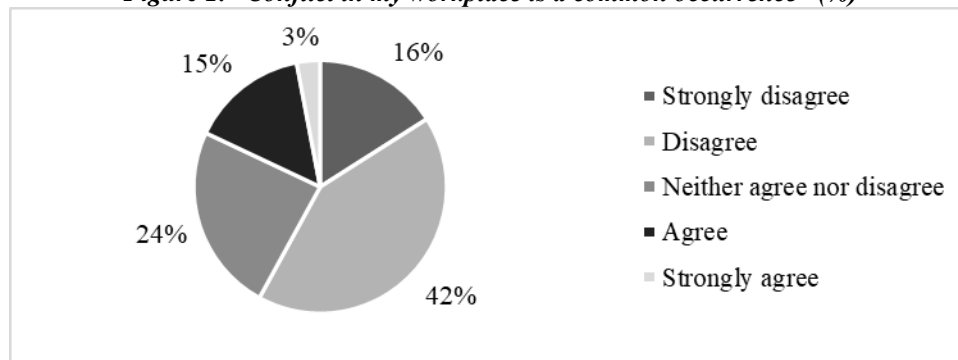
The sample consisted of 708 full-time employees from different organizations in Bulgaria. Of these, 45% were female and 55% were male. 29% of respondents were up to 30 years old, 34% were between 31 and 40 years old, 24% were between 41 and 50 years old and 13% were over 51 years old. The majority of employees had a master's or a doctoral degree (65%), 22% had a bachelor's degree and 13% were high-school graduates. Depending on the work experience, three out of ten respondents (30%) had worked from 11 to 20 years, 28% - from 21 and more years, 24% - from 6 to 10 years and 18% - up to 5 years. Most respondents (70%) were non-managers and 30% were managers (of these 7% were senior managers). Regarding the organizational size, the majority of employees (41%) were from large enterprises, followed by employees from medium enterprises (26%), from small enterprises (24%) and from micro-enterprises (9%). Respondents employed in the service industry represented the largest group in the sample (54%), 15% worked in the commercial sector, 12% - in the manufacturing industry, 14% - in the public

sector and 5% - in the voluntary sector. Most organizations were located in the capital of Bulgaria (77%), 16% - in district cities, 7% - in small cities or villages. The data were processed in IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Employees' perceptions on how often conflicts arise in organizations reveal that conflicts are inherent to the working environment in Bulgarian organizations, but their overall level is not very high. Less than a fifth of employees (18%) agreed that conflicts in the organization are a common occurrence, a quarter of them (24%) gave a hesitant answer, and 58% of them disagreed (of these 16% completely disagree) (Figure 1). Employees are more likely to argue that conflicts often arise in their workplace if they have a high school education or have a doctorate. Respectively, 28% and 35% of these respondents confirmed this compared to 18% of employees with a bachelor's degree and 18% of employees with a master's degree (Cramer's $V = 0.126$, Approx. Sig. = 0.005).

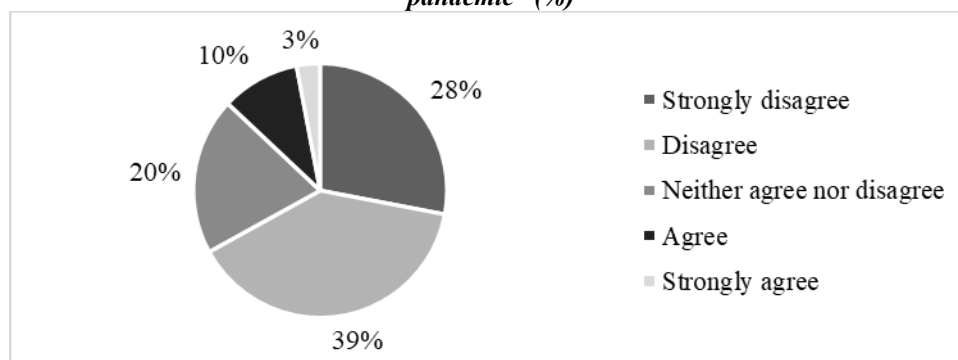
Figure 1. "Conflict in my workplace is a common occurrence" (%)



Source: Created by the author on the basis of the results of the study.

When asked if the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the overall incidence of conflicts in the organization most employees (67%) said they had not witnessed more conflicts in the last 12 months (Figure 2). A fifth of respondents (20%) were hesitant, and only 13% of employees confirmed that the pandemic has led to more disagreements. Managers are significantly more likely to state they have observed more conflict as a result of the COVID-19 crisis than employees and senior managers (18% versus 13% and 2% respectively) (Cramer's $V = 0.107$, Approx. Sig. = 0.017). An explanation for these results can be found in the broader view of managers. Due to their position in the hierarchy, they know the organizational reality better than employees: they have more information and a close look at the relationships and interactions between employees.

Figure 2. "I have witnessed more conflicts in my organization in the last 12 months than before the COVID-19 pandemic" (%)



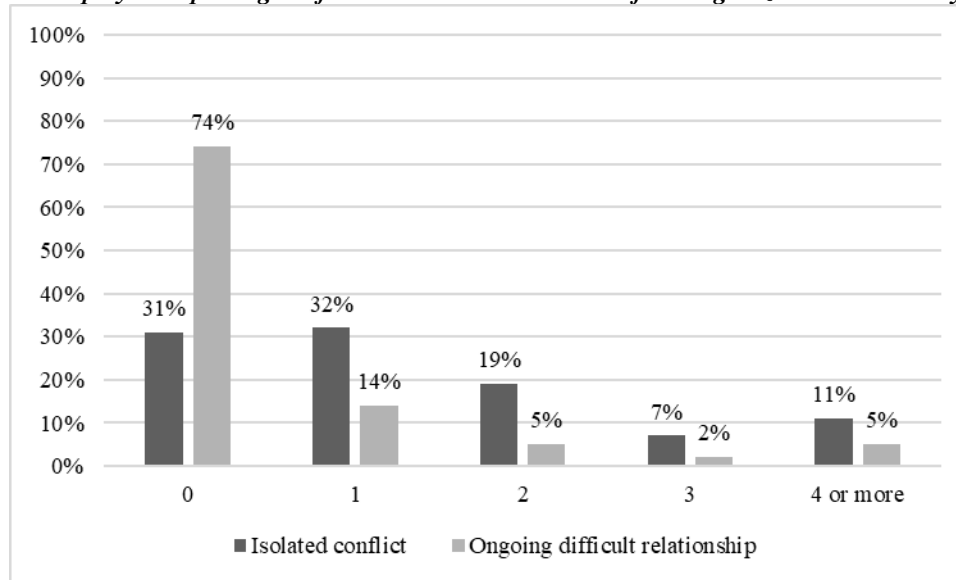
Source: Created by the author on the basis of the results of the study.

The results of the study revealed that seven out of ten employees (71%) have experienced some form of interpersonal conflict in the workplace with another member of the organization over the last 12 months, either an isolated conflict or an ongoing difficult relationship. Respondents are more likely to say they have experienced one

of the two types of conflicts in the last year if they are managers or senior managers. Respectively, 78% and 85% of these respondents reported some form of conflict, compared with non-managers (68%) (Cramer's $V = 0.127$, Approx. Sig. = 0.003).

Employees were asked to specify how many conflicts of each type they had with another member of the organization over the last 12 months. A third of them (32%) reported a single isolated dispute with a colleague over the last year, and a fifth (19%) stated two conflicts (Figure 3). Respondents in the commercial sector (25%), the manufacturing industry (26%) and the voluntary sector (28%) are significantly more likely to report two isolated conflicts than respondents in the public sector (15%) and the service industry (17%) (Cramer's $V = 0.116$, Approx. Sig. = 0.049). Managers are slightly more likely than employees to have experienced two isolated disputes in the last year (24% versus 17%) (Phi = 0.084, Approx. Sig. = 0.026). Only 7% of respondents reported three isolated conflicts with another member of the organization, and one in ten respondents (11%) - four or more conflicts.

Figure 3. Employees reporting conflicts with another member of the organization in the last year (%)



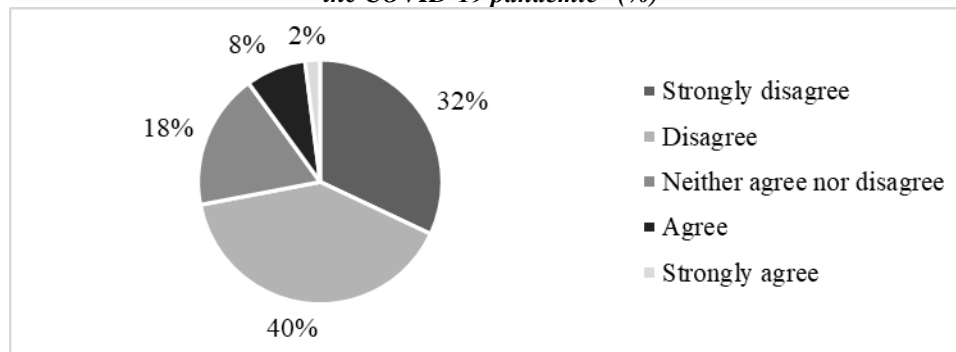
Source: Created by the author on the basis of the results of the study.

Nearly a third of employees (31%) have not experienced any isolated conflict in the last 12 months. Non-managers are slightly more likely than managers and senior managers to say they have not had an isolated conflict (35% versus 24% and 15% respectively) (Cramer's $V = 0.142$, Approx. Sig. = 0.001). Respondents with the least work experience (up to 5 years) (40%) are also more likely to report the absence of this type of conflict at work than the other groups (with work experience of 6 to 10 years - 31%, 11 to 20 years - 30%, 21 to 30 years - 29% and more than 21 years - 16%) (Cramer's $V = 0.116$, Approx. Sig. = 0.048). This result suggests that youngest and unexperienced employees stay away from disagreements at work while their older and more experienced colleagues do not shy away from difficult issues.

Unlike isolated disputes, ongoing difficult relationships are less common in Bulgarian organizations during the pandemic: 14% of employees reported an ongoing conflict in the last year (Figure 3). Employees have had more than one difficult relationship in the last 12 months even less frequently: 5% reported two, 2% reported three, and 5% reported four or more. Three quarters of respondents (74%) have not been involved in any ongoing conflict. Respondents are more likely not to have a difficult relationship with a co-worker if they work in small and large enterprises. Respectively, 78% and 77% of these employees stated that they had not experienced such a conflict in the last 12 months, compared with respondents from micro- (66%) and medium-sized enterprises (69%) (Cramer's $V = 0.107$, Approx. Sig. = 0.043).

When asked if they had more conflicts with other members of the organization in the last year than before the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of respondents (72%) denied it. One in five employees (18%) was hesitant in their answer and only one in ten employees (10%) confirmed the incidence of more workplace disagreements in the last 12 months (Figure 4).

Figure 4. “I have had more conflicts with other members of the organization in the last 12 months than before the COVID-19 pandemic” (%)



Source: Created by the author on the basis of the results of the study.

Given the inevitability of conflicts in organization, it is not surprising that there are disagreements among employees during the pandemic. The isolated disputes are more common, but this labelling suggest that respondents do not consider them serious and with major consequences. Although the percentage of ongoing difficult relationships is relatively low, it indicates the existence of serious and probably more intense conflicts with all the potentially negative effects on the employees involved, the team and the organization.

Findings show that employees are more lenient in assessing the overall incidence of conflicts than in assessing the incidence of conflicts in which they are personally involved. This result is predictable, as many employees have worked (and continue to work) remotely and do not have direct observations of their colleagues' relationships.

Our evidence also reveals that managers are more likely than employees to be involved either in an isolated dispute or in an ongoing conflict as an active party during the pandemic. Considering the role of managers in conflict management in organizations (Bankova, 2019; Mihaylova, 2017, 2020a; Raykova, 2012), this result emphasizes the need of developing their conflict resolution skills. Lack of knowledge and skills may become obstacle for managers to successfully deal with their own conflicts and the conflicts between employees (Mihaylova, 2020b).

Findings suggest that the pandemic did not have a significant impact on the overall incidence of conflicts in organizations, as well as on the incidence of conflicts between the surveyed employees and other members of the organization. A possible explanation is that the physical distance and lack of direct interaction between employees have contributed to the cooperation between them and have prevented or limited the factors that lead to disagreements during on-site work. It should be noted that the reported increase in the overall level of conflicts due to the pandemic (13%) (Figure 2) is greater than the increase in the level of interpersonal conflicts with colleagues (10%) (Figure 4). Discovering the reasons for these results could be the subject of more detailed future research on the impact of the pandemic on conflicts in organizations.

The study has several limitations. First, it focuses on interpersonal conflicts. Other types of intraorganizational conflict (intrapersonal, intragroup, and intergroup) remain outside the scope of the study. Second, the survey is based solely on employees' perceptions of the incidence of conflicts. The opinions of the other party to the conflict, colleagues and managers of the surveyed employees are not considered, which is associated with a risk of subjectivism and one-sided interpretation of the results. Due to the lack of previous research on the incidence of conflict, the results of the current study cannot be compared with pre-COVID-19 evidence. Third, a limitation to the generalizability of the results of the study is the convenience sample used that includes employees to whom the researcher was able to gain access.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected every aspect of working life. The study presented in the paper aimed to assess the scale and incidence of workplace conflict during the pandemic. Exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic influences the incidence of conflicts in organizations is important because of their considerable impact on individual and organizational performance.

Findings reveal that employees assess the overall incidence of conflicts in organizations as not very common due to remote work and lack of direct observations of the working process. When it comes to personal conflicts of employees, the number of reported conflicts increases. Majority of employees either have experienced an isolated dispute or are still having an ongoing difficult relationship with another member of the organization in the last year. Of the two types of conflicts studied, the ongoing difficult relationships are less common during the pandemic. The

COVID-19 pandemic has not affected seriously the incidence of conflicts, both at the overall and personal level, as most employees deny having witness or experiencing more workplace conflicts in the last 12 months than before. In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the present study has several implications for organizations. First, organizations face the challenge of finding appropriate tools to eliminate or limit the negative effects of pandemic on employees' relationships. Second, another challenge is to create a healthy and psychologically safe working environment for each employee. Finally, today more than ever, organizations need to provide adequate conflict management training to employees, especially managers, in order to develop their ability to deal with disagreements in the new dimensions of the workplace.

Dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and adapting to the new social and organizational reality will require more detailed research on factors that lead to an increase in the incidence of conflicts, as well as an understanding the major concerns of employees during the pandemic.

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