Exploring Causes and Consequences of University Students' Conflicts. A Scoping Review

Brunilda Zenelaga

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana
Bulevardi "Gjergj Fishta", 1023 Tiranë, Shqipëri, Albania
E-mail address: brunilda.zenelaga@unitir.edu.al
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0 002-1263-5797

Sherif Dervishi

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana
Bulevardi "Gjergj Fishta", 1023 Tiranë, Shqipëri, Albania
E-mail address: sherif.dervishi@unitir.edu.al
ORCID: https://orcid.org/ 0009-0002-9903-8107

Chiara Masaro

Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Applied Psychology
University of Padua
Piazza Capitaniato, 3 - 35139 Padova, Italy
E-mail address: chiara.masaro.1@phd.unipd.it
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7077-6336

Ján Gabčo

Faculty of Theology, Theological Institute
The Catholic University in Ružomberok
Spišská Kapitula 12, 053 04 Spišské Podhradie, Slovak Republic
E-mail address: jan.gabco@ku.sk
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6202-897X

Ervín Weiss

Department of Romance and German Studies, Faculty of Arts
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
Štefánikova 67, 949 74 Nitra, Slovakia
E-mail address: eweiss@ukf.sk
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0064-0409

ABSTRACT

Aim. Numerous studies have examined the reasons behind conflicts among pre-university students; nevertheless, there is a dearth of literature on disputes involving university students. This paper seeks to explore through a scoping review the motivations and consequences of disputes among university students.

Methods. This scoping review uses the Google Scholar database to explore 41 peer-reviewed studies and carefully analyses their empirical data. Scoping studies are often carried out with the aim of locating and cataloguing the existing data pertaining to disputes amongst university students in various countries across the world. "disputes", "conflicts", "university students" were the main search terms and phrases that yielded an enormous number of distinct, peer-reviewed papers.

Results. Studies showed that interpersonal factors, institutional climate, social context as well as cultural factors influence the disputes where university students are involved. It also identified that disputes related to the university students can have not only negative consequences, but also positive ones.

Conclusions. There will be a valuable source of information for universities as they create institutional services meant to support students on dispute resolution. The study made the recommendation that a psycho-sociological viewpoint can be used in order to thoroughly examine and comprehend the causes and consequences of disputes related to the university students. The research also makes the case for the necessity for additional research to be conducted in order to comprehend the numerous factors that contribute to disagreements among university students in specific contexts.

Keywords: university students, disputes, conflicts, causes, consequences, scoping review

Introduction

People can experience interpersonal conflict anytime within their lives and in various contexts. Conflict deals with an individual's "struggle" that requires "at least two sides […] whose aims do not correspond to each other and one of whom interferes with the aims of the other one" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2010, p. 11). People's experiences of conflict can involve unknown others, family members, loved ones, schoolmates, and workmates in different social situations. From this premise, conflict cannot be understood as an inherently positive or negative phenomenon, as the potentially both detrimental and constructive consequences related to it are strictly linked to people's reactions to conflict as a social life problem (Arslan et al., 2010; Kantek & Gezer, 2009; Gresham & Elliott, 1993; Öner, 2006 as cited in Arslan et al., 2010).

Research has extensively studied conflict in educational contexts. Juliet Millican (2018) underlines that the literature has agreed on the role of education sys-

tems in fostering students' enhanced reciprocal respect and conflict prevention, bringing people together, and promoting critical thinking, tolerance, and peace. At the same time, literature has supported the unavoidability of conflict in the context of education (Arslan et al., 2010; Kantek & Gezer, 2009). "Conflict, which is a natural result of human communication, is generally defined as an internal misunderstanding that occurs from the differences in thoughts, values and feelings between two organisations or people" (Kantek & Gezer, 2009, p. 101) As inherently connected to humans' experiences of social relationships conflict in school – involving students and other students, or students and managers and instructors, as well as the conflict involving faculty management and instructors — is considered as "natural" and "unavoidable" as it would be in any workplace (Ibid, p. 101-102). The significant changes that the family and its value system have undergone over the last 35 years, the crisis of the family and the increasing influence of socialisation outside it, seem to have influenced the education of children (Králik, 2023) and indirectly their attitude towards conflict. Literature has indeed widely investigated pre-university students' conflict concerning primary and secondary levels of education students, as understanding it is crucial for students' experiences and skills development in their educational environments.

Concurrently, conflict in university contexts has been scantly deepened. According to Millican (2018), the relationship between higher education and conflict has recently been representing a compellingly emerging line of studies in education. According to the author, this can be linked to the potentially disruptive role of education, which is particularly relevant in university contexts and people's conflict experiences. Millican (2018) indeed underlines that, during the 21st century, non-equal, denied, or wrong access to education can foster people's disaffection, which, along with poverty and unemployment, can promote civic and ethnic conflict that – according to the extant documentation (Smith, 2010; Smith & Smith Ellison, 2012; Smith & Vaux, 2003) has been likely to have been brought to the forefront by young people in general, and university students in particular. In line with this latter contribution, Ewa Gmurzyńska (2021) has more recently pointed out that university disputes have increased. Among internal and external factors analysed, Gmurzyńska (2021) sheds light on the challenges faced by and within universities in the 21st century. With universities needing to adjust to multiple global, local, political, and social crises, the role of universities has changed, along with students' expectations of university and, overall, the role of universities in society. In this regard, one of the external factors analysed by Gmurzyńska (2021) is represented by the Covid-19 pandemic, whose financial effects on universities are expected, according to the author, to be long-lasting, especially on teaching quality. Gmurzyńska's work (2021) can moreover be aligned to the one of Isabel Padrón et al. (2021), who showed that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the psychological health of a group of Spanish

university students. Consistently with the body of research documenting university students' vulnerability during the outbreak, Padrón et al. (2021) underlined university students' higher levels of self-reported interpersonal conflict as one of the detrimental stressors for their psychological health. Gmurzyńska's work (2021) also reflects on the role of globalisation with the associated increasing competition and the related increasing education costs, with the educational opportunities in these contexts are likely to be more ensured in economically and technologically developed countries; increasing students' international mobility which requires universities to meet the needs and expectations of students interculturally; the phenomenon of democratisation of higher education, which widens academic opportunities while potentially heightening students' anonymity by diminishing students and academic's chances of direct contact. Within this scenario, Gmurzyńska (2021) posits that conflict in the university context deals explicitly with a change in students' expectations toward universities, as their role is today more in line with a provider of a ready-to-use education. With students as universities' consumers, Gmurzyńska (2021) supports the vision according to which students now expect universities to provide them with an education valuable and usable for the upcoming professional world.

On the other hand, the crises that universities have been confronted with during the 21st century and their role as conflict-promoter in university contexts have to be considered, according to Gmurzyńska (2021), also taking into account that universities are complex organisations that have been traditionally characterised by conflict. For example, their composition of groups – students, administrative staff, and academics—a variety of group-related interests and decision-making strategies, which are likely to lead to disputes. Thus, as Allan Edward Barsky (2002) states, the study of conflict in universities has to consider universities' uniqueness entailing their structures, which universities represent a unique chance to study conflict, based on universities' structure, which includes a hierarchical administration and a peer philosophy. The university has a tenure system to make sure that people have job security, an ethic of academic independence in a system that is very regulated and bureaucratic, departments that are decentralized and often function on their own, and many various groups that the university serves.

In sum, the reasons and effects of pre-university student and teenager conflicts have been the subject of countless studies. Concurrently, there are relatively few studies that specifically addressed university-student disputes before 1995 and particularly in certain situations and contexts. In an era of the democratisation of higher education, and the university environments are becoming more and more heterogeneous, disputes among university students are common and can arise from various sources. Understanding these disputes is crucial for fostering a positive educational environment.

The purpose of this paper is to carry out a scoping review regarding the causes and consequences of the conflicts experienced by university students all over the world. The objectives of this article are: (a) to create a map of the studies related to conflicts involving university students during the last 30 years within the global context (b) to identify and describe the causes of conflicts involving university students as they are documented by the extant literature; (c) to identify and describe the consequences of conflicts involving university students as they are documented by the extant literature.

We conducted a scoping review with the following goals in mind: a) to determine the kinds of evidence that are currently available regarding the causes and effects of the disputes among university students; b) to investigate the methods used in this field of study; c) to prepare a preliminary report for a systematic review; and d) to locate and assess knowledge gaps (Munn et al., 2018).

By understanding the causes and consequences of conflicts involving university students based on the international experiences that the literature documents, this article also aims to shed light on new ways to address and manage conflicts involving university students.

Methods

Scoping reviews are a sort of knowledge synthesis that finds and synthesises an existing or developing body of literature on a particular topic using an organised and iterative process. These reviews are often carried out to map and identify the available evidence (See: Munn et al., 2018).

Scoping reviews are especially useful when the literature is diverse and complex.

We used scoping review as a research method, because of the descriptive and exploratory nature of this study (Peters et al., 2020).

For the initial search, four categories of the key search terms were identified: "conflicts", "disputes", "university students", "higher education". The initial search generated 18.800 results. After removing the duplicates, the search returned 4221 articles. Then, the titles were screened for eligibility, and 168 articles were chosen. After that, abstracts were screened and 41 papers were reselected to undergo to a scoping review. Finding and mapping the evidence that is now accessible regarding the reasons behind university student disputes in various nations across the world is the main goal of this scoping review. A scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) checklist is also utilised for data analysis (Tricco et al., 2018).

The specific keywords we used to select papers were: "conflicts", "disputes", "university students". Additionally, we used some restrictions such as: a) articles published by 2024; b) articles published in English language.

RESULTS

Mapping of Studies in a Global Context Related to Conflicts Involving University Students during the Last 30 Years

Year of Publications
The number of research articles published yearly represents a steady increase in interest. More precisely, we noticed an increase in interest for the issue in publications throughout the 2010s. This is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Timeframe of the Papers' Review

	1990-s	2000-s	2010-s	2020-s
Series1	4	8	23	6
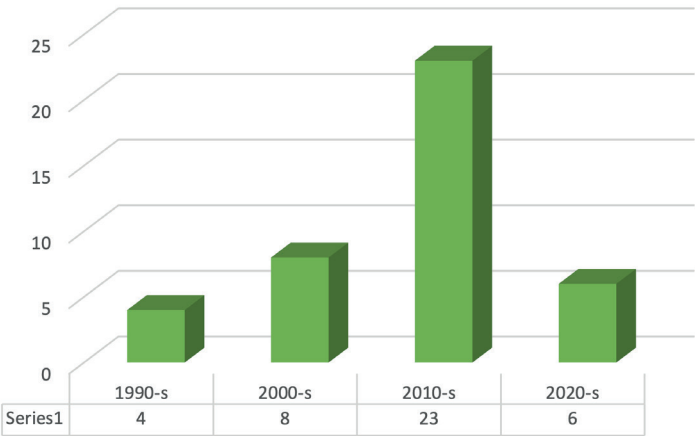
Source. Own research.

Geographical Location
Geographical settings varied as research was conducted with populations mostly in USA, and others in Canada, Australia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Netherlands, Sweden, Ukraine, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, etc. However we identified a lack of the researches in this topic in Balkan countries. These sociodemographic and cultural backgrounds were considered for the interpretations of research findings.

Research Design and Methodology
By screening the papers, three main research designs have been identified: (a) The exploration of the secondary sources; (b) The quantitative approach: surveys given mostly to college students, but also to academic staff and administrative per-

sonnel; (c) The qualitative approach, which includes case studies, topic analysis, and semi-structured interviews.

Causes of Conflicts Related to University Students

According to our research based on 41 paper reviews, the studies that had been focused in students' communication and their relationship with one another and university, have been gradually rising, starting mostly from 1995 and beyond. This trend is continually increasing during the last three decades. It is important to mention that research in this field was first conducted in 1995 in North America and Canada, to then being spread in many universities world wide in all continents throughout 2010s. The democratisation of higher education has made university environments more complex and therefore the conflict appears as a common phenomenon in these educational organisations, a phenomenon that needs to be explored and recognised.

The interest of researchers in the field of communication characteristics in university environments stemming from many cultural backgrounds, derive mostly from three main causes: (a) personal disputes, (b) institutional disputes and (c) social context disputes, all of which are rising during the 2020s, as the concern to follow the latest trends of society in the digitalisation age that is affecting also university life are rising as well.

Individual and Interpersonal Causes

Individual and interpersonal causes of conflicts related to university students are well described in various researches (Akparep, 2019; Bazezew & Neka, 2017; Gibson, 1995; Goddiksen et al., 2021; Kunnen, 2010; Liu & Dong, 2016; Park et al., 2014; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). Also life situations as well as multiple roles outside the university play an important role on the conflict involvement for students (Home, 1998).

The gender variable also reflects a variation in the typology of interpersonal disputes. In a survey, students were asked if they had been involved in any disputes while attending Bahir Dar University in Ethiopia. As a result, it was discovered that almost 70% of male respondents fought with 30% of female students, involving everything from physical challenges to rumours. Key informants noted that whilst male students frequently performed physical challenge and insulting, female students were more likely to engage in gossip and insulting. Furthermore, it was observed that male students regularly instigate disputes by sexually harassing female students (Bazezew & Neka, 2017).

There is a significant case study concerning university student dating couples in 17 different countries that discusses the interpersonal causes of problems (Straus, 2004).

This research is expected to give some of the necessary psychometric data. Sexual coercion, negotiation, psychological aggression, physical assault, and physical harm are the five CTS2 that are used to measure these aspects of romantic relationships between 7,179 students at 33 universities in 17 different countries. To support these tests, it offers examples of validity and reliability evidence. Even if the data concerns romantic interactions amongst university students, the results are sufficiently positive to encourage the application of the CTS2 instrument across cultural contexts.

Institutional Causes of Conflicts

Communication gap is not a common problem only between students but also with management of university members. A communication gap between students and school officials can be the primary source of student-management conflicts including structural issues and personal variables (Adeyemi et al, 2010). As evidence for the claim, Werner Havenga and Jan Visagie (2011) highlighted a few communication elements as the fundamental drivers or origins of conflict. Conflicts do occur when there is a breakdown in communication between administration and students (Kreitner, 2001). David Ajibade (2013) as well as Florence Oluremi Olaleye and Babatope B. Arogundade (2013) state that a key contributing factor to student-management conflicts is inadequate communication between students and institutional administrators.

The non-fulfillment of students' expectations towards professors is another reason that generates interpersonal conflicts between them (Tantleff-Dunn & Dunn, 2002) students occasionally believe that any instructor of a psychology course is, in some way, a clinical psychologist. As a result, individuals could believe that interactions with their psychology teachers should reflect their preconceived notions about mental health professionals. They could think, for instance, that correspondence with psychology professors needs to be exceptionally kind and sympathetic.

Institutional causes of conflicts, which can be considered conflicts of a meso level. These causes are taken in consideration from many authors (Akparep, 2019; Ayoma, 2015; Butler, 2007; Gonzales et al., 2014; Idris et al., 2017; Tantleff-Dunn et al., 2002; Zaman et al., 2024).

Students cite grades, tests, and excuses as the most common causes of memorable disagreements (Tantleff-Dunn et al., 2002). Generally speaking, students feel they tried to communicate with their instructors, according to the findings. Regretfully, a significant portion of kids expressed anxiety in reaction to their teachers' answers. By being aware of how the power imbalance affects how students view their actions and by upholding a high standard of professionalism in all facets of instruction, faculty can assist avoid and resolve conflicts.

Conflicts among teachers, between teachers and administration, and between teachers and students were prevalent in the surveyed schools, adversely affecting students' academic performance (Ayoma, 2015). Key issues included poor commu-

nication among teachers, perceived unfair treatment from administration, and harsh treatment of students by teachers. Overall, these conflicts undermined collaborative working relationships, leading to detrimental impacts on students' educational outcomes, particularly in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations.

Conflicts were mostly caused by leadership crises, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of communication between students and university administration (Akparep, 2019). Additionally, 33.3% of the student respondents said that management's responsiveness to the needs of the students was even very slow.

The new forms of university organisation, such as online teaching, exposes university students to new conflicts. There are several instances when the programme presentation and implementation are at odds as mentioned in a study about a nationwide Swedish online education initiative (Dippe, 2006). Conflicts also exist between senior university management and some of the instructors and course leaders, in addition to between teachers and students. According to the study (Dippe, 2006), a large number of teachers were thought to be missing from online discussions by the pupils. When compared to, say, in-person encounters, the value of teachers in helping students develop their knowledge is likewise rated very low.

Social and Cultural Context Causes of Conflicts

At a macro level, the studies showed that some conflicts within the university, where the students are involved, reflect the conflicts found in the social context outside the university.

The main cause of interpersonal conflict among students at Bahir Dar University (Ethiopia) was identified as religious and ethnic songs, such Tigrigna, that were played in the dormitaries. This was the case on all campuses. According to the survey, there is a significant amount of dispute among students, especially in their dormitaries, over music in various Ethiopian languages, such as Tigrigna, Oromigna, or Gojamigna/Gonderigna. The assertion of one ethnic group's superiority over another is another major source of conflict on college campuses, according to key insiders. Approximately 87% of the respondents expressed agreement in this regard (Bazezew & Neka, 2017).

In another case is showed that Native American adult learners' experience at a largely white university in the US's Northern Great Plains. According to him, Native American "ways of knowing" and worldview, which are rooted in customs, religion, culture, and heritage, create conflict since they frequently diverge from the institutional "ways of knowing" of universities, which are founded on science and research (Buckmiller, 2010).

Some aspects of university administration—such as communication, a lack of infrastructure, or the university's inability to guarantee student safety—also contributed to conflicts within universities, other social factors—such as religious fundamentalism and the broader socioeconomic crisis brought on by rising petroleum product prices—also played a role (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2011). As the authors said, another factor contributing

to conflict in Nigerian higher education, particularly in federal institutions, is ethnicity. They claim that a problem that has been plaguing Nigeria's academic institutions for years has led to a breakdown in law and order, a disturbance of public peace, the loss of life and property, and the temporary closure of universities.

These examples show that, in a sense, universities can be seen of as laboratories where all the dynamics present in society at large are mirrored. For this reason, research conducted in universities and the education system generally helps to shed light for society as a whole.

Consequences of Conflicts

Conflicts have significant consequences, affecting individuals, communities, and entire nations in various ways. Conflicts between students can have significant consequences, both for the individuals involved and the broader school community. While conflicts or disputes between students are generally seen as negative, they can also lead to positive outcomes if handled properly.

Negative Consequences

Conflicts occur when people engage in circumstances where their goals are conflicting and where achieving one's goals relies on the actions, choices, and decisions of the other person (Ada, 2013).

There are at least three negative consequences to highlight from this scoping review:

- Student disputes had a detrimental impact on output and damaged the university's reputation (Akparep, 2022; Cushman & West, 2006; Lingard, 2007).
- A hostile climate in higher education institutions will lead to antagonism, low productivity, inefficiency, and underutilisation (Adepoju & Sofowora, 2012).
- Academically relevant outcomes such as depression, perceived college value, grades, subsequent course load, and retention are impacted by role conflict and role strain in older adult students (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995).
- Conflicts at the institution cause students to graduate with degrees that aren't useful and aren't able to get jobs (Akomolafe & Ibijola, 2011).

Positive Consequences

While conflicts in a university environment can be challenging, they present opportunities for personal, academic, and institutional growth. When approached constructively, conflicts can lead to better communication, stronger relationships, intellectual advancement, and positive changes within the university community.

Conflicts in a university environment, while often viewed as negative, can lead to several positive outcomes when handled constructively. These positive consequences can foster

personal growth, academic collaboration, and institutional improvement. Here's how conflicts can have a beneficial impact:

- *Personal Growth and Development*. When handled well, conflicts promote self-control, improve interpersonal communication skills, lower tensions and suspensions, improve school climate, and increase the university's ability to respect and value diverse viewpoints (Oladunjoye & Omemu, 2013; Watson et al., 2017).
- *Institutional Improvement*. Conflicts between students also leads to positive reforms in governance and conflict resolution (Akparep, 2022).

A Balanced Analysis of Consequences

According to a study, disputes between students and management at UDS between 1999 and 2009 had both beneficial and harmful effects. The conflicts' most unsettling side effects included the loss of productive teaching and learning contact hours, the shortened academic calendar, the closure of the school, aggression, insecurity, high levels of tension and anxiety, uncontrolled student wandering, and an increase in social vices. These factors resulted in low student performance on the Trimester exams and, in certain cases, the expulsion of students from the university due to subpar performance (Akparep, 2022).

But conflicts have also the "other side of the coin". Further research in the University for Development Studies (Akparep, 2022)**,** concludes that while conflicts between students negatively affected productivity and tarnished the university's image, they also led to positive reforms in governance and conflict resolution. A balanced approach to manage conflicts can allow universities to benefit from the constructive aspects of conflict while minimising the disruptions they cause. Additionally, there have been cases where military and police personnel have driven students off campuses in order to prevent more fighting and property damage, forcing them to stay there until the campuses are peaceful again. This wastes valuable teaching and learning time.

Conclusion — Addressing and Managing Conflicts in Universities

Based on a balanced approach of conflicts consequences, through this scoping review we identified some ways how to address and manage the conflicts in universities, were students (but not only) are involved.

Training in negotiation and conflict resolution techniques is crucial in universities, They assert that the management of diversity, equity, and inclusiveness concerns also requires the use of negotiating and dispute resolution skills (Schaller & Gatesman-Ammer, 2022).

Professors at universities can have a significant role in preventing and resolving student disputes. As a result, they must establish an environment that is favourable to instruction and learning, where students can relate to what they are learning. The authors propose

"Civic Education," a course designed to raise students' knowledge of the value of nationalism, national identity, and peaceful coexistence in a society (Malihah et al., 2017).

Campus mediation programmes are important and can help students learn alternative dispute resolution while resolving a range of conflicts. A strategic approach for integrating a dispute resolution programme into a college campus's culture needs to be developed (Jameson, 1998), drawing on Everett Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovations.

The ombudsman mediation can serve a critical role and be the main internal, dual-purpose tool for dispute resolution in higher education institutions. Since they were initially established in Canada and the USA in the middle of the 1960s, ombudsman offices—also known as permanent conflict mediation agencies—at universities can be a useful model for assisting academic institutions in resolving disputes globally (Leidenfrost, 2015).

Also an inclusive spirit in universities, as in all levels of schools in general would also reduce the level of conflict and provide students with a competence that would help the peace-building in the larger society (Duka et al., 2024; Presi et al., 2024; Zenelaga et al., 2024).

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Appendix

Table A1

Papers Used for Scoping Review According to the Publication Period

1990-s	2000-s	2010-s	2020-s
Gibson (1995)	Barsky (2002)	Arslan et al (2010)	Goddiksen et al (2021)
Gigliotti and Huff (1998)	Adepoju (2003)	Buckmiller (2010)	Gmurzyńska, (2021)
Home (1998)	Strauss (2004)	Kunnen (2010)	Padrón (2021)
Jameson (1998)	Dippe (2006)	Wilmot & Hocker (2010)	Schaller (2022)
	Cushman & West (2006)	Smith (2010)	Akparep (2022)
	Lingard (2007)	Akomolafe and Ibijola (2011)	Zaman et. al (2024)
	Butler (2007)	Fatile and Andejiwon (2011)	
	Kantek & Gezer (2009)	Smith & Ellison (2012)	
		Park and Sprung (2013)	
		Oladunjoye and Omemu (2013)	
		Ada (2013)	
		Gonzales et al (2014)	
		Vasquez Salgado et al (2014)	
		Dunn et al. (2015)	
		Leidenfrost (2015)	
		Malihah et. al (2015)	
		Idris et. al (2017)	
		Bazezew and Neka (2017)	
		Rommel and Baily (2017)	
		Liu and Dong (2017)	
		Watson et. al. (2017)	
		Millican (2018)	
		Akparep (2019)	

Source. Syntheses by own research.