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## A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON CONFLICT REASONS IN TURKISH SEAFARERS' WORKPLACE

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### ABSTRACT

*“The ship” is a very unorthodox workplace due to numerous differences. The work and living spaces are one and the same, there is no place to go to relax when the work is over, family and friends are out of reach, and the organizational structure is almost military-like, with a high level of hierarchy. Ships are workplaces where working in harmony does not only affect the work performance, but the safety of life and goods on board, and the ship as well. However, despite these conditions that are the backdrop of conflict, the ship as a workplace and the reasons for conflict that arise among seafarers are yet to be studied in this literature. Due to these reasons, this study aims to identify the reasons for conflict in seafarers' workplace. For this aim, a semi-structured interview was carried out with officers who are actively working on board ships. A total of 18 interviews had been carried out, and in those interviews, total of 29 reasons for conflict have emerged. “culture-ethnicity-religion”, “hierarchy”, “food” and “working hours” were found to be the reasons that are on the forefront. Findings of the study show that there are various reasons for conflict that can only be seen in a unique workplace such as a ship. Identification of these reasons will help better understand the conflict situations on board ships as well as contribute to the workplace conflict literature.*

**Keywords:** *Conflict, reasons for conflict, seafarers, workplace, workplace conflict*

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## GEMİADAMLARININ ÇALIŞMA ALANLARINDA ÇATIŞMA SEBEPLERİ ÜZERİNE NİTEL BİR ÇALIŞMA

### ÖZET

*Gemi, birçok sebeple diğer iş alanlarından çok farklı çalışma alanıdır. Yaşam ve çalışma alanlarının aynı olması, mesai sonrası gidip rahatlayacak bir yerin eksikliği, aile ve arkadaşlardan uzak olma ve yüksek bir hiyerarşik düzene sahip organizasyon yapısı gemiyi diğer çalışma alanlarından farklı kılmaktadır. Gemiler, uyumlu çalışmanın sadece iş performansı değil, can ve mal güvenliğini de yakından ilgilendirdiği çalışma alanlarıdır. Ancak, çatışmaya gebe olan bu şartlar mevcut iken, bir iş yeri olarak gemi ve gemiadamları arasında çıkan çatışmaların sebepleri bu literatürde henüz incelenmemiştir. Bu sebeple, çalışmada, gemilerde çatışma oluşmasına mahal veren faktörlerin tespiti amaçlanmaktadır. Bu amaç için aktif olarak gemide görev alan zabıtlarla yapılandırılmış mülakatlar uygulanarak iş yerindeki çatışmaların sebepleri tespit edilmiştir. Zabıtlar ile yapılan 18 mülakatta, toplam 29 çatışma sebebi tespit edilmiş olup, bu sebeplerden öne çıkanlar “kültür-etnik köken-din”, “hiyerarşi”, “yemek”, ve “çalışma saatleri” olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Çalışmanın sonucunda, sadece özel çalışma koşulları olan gemi gibi bir çalışma ortamında doğabilecek çeşitli çatışma sebepleri tespit edilmiştir. Bu tespitler gemilerde yaşanan çatışmaların daha iyi anlaşılması, çözülmesi ve önlenmesi gibi hususlarda yardımcı olabilecek olmanın yanı sıra, iş yeri çatışmaları literatürü için de önemli bir katkı sağlamaktadır.*

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Çatışma, çatışma sebepleri, gemiadamları, iş yeri, iş yeri çatışmaları

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict has always been there, wherever there is human, and it is no different for organizations. This unavoidable presence of conflict in workplaces makes the effective handling of it essential (Rahim et al., 1999). Main reason behind conflict management's importance lies in the consequences of it. Conflict in the workplace affects persons, their behavior, both towards each other and towards their work, and consequently the organizations' performance. Due to these reasons understanding organizational conflict and the role that it plays in influencing employee behavior and work outcomes is now more important than it ever was (Suliman and Abdulla, 2005).

Conflict in the workplace can manifest itself through negative experiences amongst people, that vary from minor disagreements to severe altercations, which includes insults; perceptions of injustice, inequity, or

unfairness; goal obstructions or hindered goals, incompetence, and being the target of bullying in verbal or physical form or aggression on varying degrees (Scheiman and Reid, 2008).

Specific to ships as a workplace, there are higher numbers of triggers for conflict when compared with regular workplaces. Conditions such as top to down distribution of authority, multinational crew, enclosed working and living spaces all contribute to increase the stress, burnout and psychological health of the seafarers. Gordon (1991: 374) states it is easier for conflict to manifest itself in multinational settings, due to obstacles that drawback communication such as different languages being spoken, differing personal styles, and cultural characteristics. On the other hand, display of authority in the workplace, more often than not, found to be related with subjection and domination, as it presents a hierarchical structure and structured roles among the organization. While authority might seem a position to be desired for most employees, higher the authority, higher the responsibility and potential for interpersonal problems (Scheiman and Reid, 2008).

Seafaring is a demanding profession both mentally and physically, and as a consequence, has a high rate of early exit from the profession. It is argued that most decisions employees make regarding their work, whether it be participating, producing or quitting, are affected by the climate of their workplace (Barnard, 1997). This is the main reason behind this study, determining the reasons of workplace conflict of an unorthodox workplace, the ship, and initiate the first step on the way to more habitable and workable place for seafarers.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Workplace conflict is a result of wide range of factors and as almost every adult spends most of their time in their workplace, it is an essential setting for conflict situations (Lipsky et al., 2016). One can deduce the importance of the workplace environment for seafarers, as they live and work in the same physical space and do not have the chance to leave it or distance themselves from the people in it.

Conflict can manifest itself on different levels. These levels include personal, group and organizational levels. Koçel (2001) lists five levels for conflict as intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup and interorganizational conflicts. Interpersonal conflict in the workplace can be faced as a minor disagreement or can be as severe as physically attacking a coworker (Spector and Jex, 1998). While there are many

varying definitions for interpersonal conflict, the studies of Galtung (1996); Pondy, (1967); Putnam & Poole, (1987); Thomas, (1992a, 1992b); Wall & Callister, (1995) provide three general themes that are present in any interpersonal conflict incident: interdependence, interference and disagreement. Interdependence exists when for each party, reaching their individual goals somehow depends on the actions of the other. Disagreement exists when parties think there is a difference in their goals, values, needs or opinions. Interference exists when one or more parties interfere with others in their pursuit for their goals, which results in negative emotion. The most common range of interpersonal conflict in organizations is superior-subordinate conflict (Seval, 2006).

Secondly, intergroup conflict is defined by Tajfel (1982) as opposing group goals in obtaining scarce resources which in result births competition whereas superordinate goals birth cooperation. Thus, intergroup conflict is the most common form of conflict that can be seen in organizations (Akova and Akin, 2015). This definition is not that different of interpersonal conflict, but on a group scale. Interorganizational conflict is looked upon as a special case of lateral intergroup conflict between separate yet functionally interdependent units connected along the flow of work (Pruden, 1969). As organizations are functionally interdependent and the resources are scarce, it is inevitable for interorganizational relations to be absent of conflict (Assael, 1969).

In the vast workplace conflict literature, one can find studies focusing on corporate settings (Babalola et al., 2018; Fortado, 2001; Scheiman and Reid, 2008, Sonnentag et al., 2013) rather frequently. Other topics of interest scholars analyzed include but not limited to; the human resource perspective (Van Gramberg and Teicher, 2006), the public sector (Ayoko and Pekerti, 2008; Varhama and Björkqvist, 2004), airway crew (Upchurch and Grassman, 2015), hospital employees and health care workers (Doucet et al., 2009; Zweibel et al., 2008), graduate and undergraduate students (Kisamore et al., 2010), and police officers (Dijkstra et al., 2014). Most common reasons for conflict in ordinary workplaces are personality; unfairness, spite, reputation formation, education and experience, needs and goals, leadership, personal history, resources, time pressure, success criteria, and management support (Falk, 2003, Renwick, 1975; Barki and Hartwick, 2001).

While scholars of different disciplines have studied the matter extensively, in hierarchical organizations such as police force and closed-quarter transportation services such as airways, both which bear resemblance in some ways in their nature to seafaring profession, there is

no study that is found regarding the workplace of the seafarers, in which conflict situations can have dire consequences. Seafarers face unique circumstances through their employment such as the temporary nature of the job; working at sea for extended period of time, and isolation in a space which is both the working and living space (Bauer, 2008).

In the literature regarding the seafarers, it can be seen that factors that can be the antecedents of conflict such as mental health and psychological stress (Iversen, 2012; Carotenuto et al., 2013) being apart from their families (Thomas et al., 2003), their health (Elo, 1985; Hansen et al., 2005), fatigue (Wadsworth et al., 2006; Parker et al., 1997; Smith, 2007, Allen et al., 2007) and employment of women seafarers (Thomas, 2004; Belcher et al., 2003) were studied along with what can be the consequence of conflict, such as mortality and fatality of seafarers (Roberts and Marlow, 2005; Nielsen and Roberts, 1999). However, none of the studies handles the issue in any relation with conflict and the notion of conflict seems to be overlooked in the seafarer literature as a whole. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the root of conflict in seafarers' workplace.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this study, in accordance with its exploratory nature, the qualitative approach was implemented. Semi-structured interview method was used for the data collection as this method is highly suitable for instances when it is needed to obtain thorough understanding of one's opinions on a matter, without risking objectivity (Borg and Gall, 1983). In addition, Bugher (1980) states when the respondents are informed about the purpose of the study, the questions of the interview are clear and worded properly, and when they are ensured to be kept anonymous, they can be highly honest and open about their opinions on the matter in question. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. Semi-structured interviews are not strictly formal and can be defined as conversational, its best use is gathering deeper knowledge and information on a topic (Harrell and Bradley, 2009; Longhurst, 2003). That is why the semi-structured interview method was chosen over other qualitative methods that can be used for exploratory purposes. This method allowed the respondents to talk thoroughly and give examples regarding their own experiences regarding the issue, thus providing the author with a better understanding of the matter.

The population of this study consist of deck and engineering department officers that are currently active in their profession in Turkey.

The main reasoning behind this population decision is the fact that this group represents the most up-to-date views regarding conflict situations on board ships for Turkish seafarers. Purposeful sampling technique was chosen for this study, as this method of sampling depends on selecting information rich cases, which can provide vast amount of information of the highest importance to the purpose of an in-depth study (Patton, 2014).

The number of participants for the interview part of the study was not predetermined and data collection continued to the point that saturation was reached. 18 interviews have been conducted with seafarers that are actively working on board ships. 11 of said interviews had been conducted face to face while 7 had been conducted using video calls via Skype application, due to measures taken against Covid-19 outbreak. Interviews lasted an hour on average with some shorter (35 minutes), and some longer (1 hour and 15 minutes) as participants with more experience had more to tell, interviews with those type of participants lasted longer compared to the others. Profile information of the interviewees can be found in Table 1.

Participants were asked what the reasons for conflict on board ships on interpersonal, intergroup and interorganizational levels are. Apart from these three questions, whenever required the interviewer used probing questions in order to gain additional information on subject matter.

**Table 1:** Profile Information of the Interviewees

<b>Interviewee Code</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Department</b>	<b>Interview Duration</b>	<b>Gender</b>
SM-01	Master	17 years	Deck	75 min.	Male
SM-02	Master	6 years	Deck	67 min.	Male
SM-03	Master	10 years	Deck	62 min.	Male
SM-04	Master	12 years	Deck	65 min.	Male
FO-01	First Officer	10 years	Deck	55 min.	Male
SM-05	Master	10 years	Deck	69 min.	Male
FO-02	First Officer	6 years	Deck	51 min.	Male
FO-03	First Officer	2 years	Deck	52 min.	Male
FE-01	First Engineering Officer	2 years	Engine	55 min.	Male

**Table 1:** Profile Information of the Interviewees (cont.)

Interviewee Code	Rank	Experience	Department	Interview Duration	Gender
TE-01	Third Engineering Officer	1.5 years	Engine	49 min.	Female
CE-01	Chief Engineering Officer	10 years	Engine	60 min.	Male
CE-02	Chief Engineering Officer	8 years	Engine	62 min.	Male
CE-03	Chief Engineering Officer	11 years	Engine	60 min.	Male
CE-04	Chief Engineering Officer	10 years	Engine	57 min.	Male
CE-05	Chief Engineering Officer	11 years	Engine	59 min.	Male
CE-06	Chief Engineering Officer	7 years	Engine	55 min.	Male
FO-03	First Officer	10 years	Deck	53 min.	Male
TE-02	Third Engineering Officer	3 years	Engine	45 min.	Female

In the coding process, three ranges of conflict (interpersonal conflict, intergroup conflict, interorganizational conflict) were handled as predetermined codes and reasons for conflict were analyzed as emerging codes since these phenomena are yet to be included in the existing literature. In order to ensure the reliability of the coding, intercoding process was adopted with another scholar. With the help of MaxQDA 2018 software and its tools, qualitative data was quantified and the prominent reasons for conflict were found.

#### 4. FINDINGS

Upon the completion of the coding process, a total of 29 codes have emerged. Table 2 shows the codes that emerged in the study with their frequency and percentages.

**Table 2:** Frequency and Percentage of Codes

Codes	Frequency	Percentage
hierarchy	14	6,39
culture-ethnicity-religion	14	6,39
working hours	11	5,02
working conditions\food	10	4,57
performance pressure	9	4,11
distributive justice	8	3,65
ego	8	3,65
communication	8	3,65
education	7	3,20
job allocation	7	3,20
personal traits	7	3,20
stress\contract	7	3,20
meritocracy	6	2,74
stress	6	2,74
age-generation gap	6	2,74
alumni favoritism	5	2,28
role ambiguity	4	1,83
not meeting the demands	4	1,83
mobbing-grudge	4	1,83
idleness	3	1,37
stress\being away	3	1,37
conflict resolution	2	0,91
alcohol	2	0,91
exhaustion-burnout	2	0,91
wages	2	0,91
culture-ethnicity-religion\politics	2	0,91
gender	2	0,91
gossip	1	0,46
working conditions	1	0,46

As it can be deduced from the table, “culture-ethnicity-religion” was the leading code which repeated 14 times in 18 interviews, followed by “hierarchy” with same amount of repetitions, working hours with 11 repetitions and “food” as a sub code of “working conditions” with 10 repetitions. “Culture-ethnicity-religion” being the joint most repeated code even though the study was carried out with solely Turkish seafarers stems from the fact that crew composition can be multi-national. In addition, few participants noted even in single-nation crew settings, issues such as hometown, region of hometown, and devotion to religion can induce conflict.

In the context of the research subject, interpersonal conflict describes conflict situations that are experienced among two or more single persons. Intergroup conflict describes conflict situations that arise among two or more groups, formed structurally or naturally. Lastly, interorganizational conflict describes the conflict situations among the ship and parties that are in relation with the ship such as ship owning firm, ship management firm, cargo owner, and charterer.

Regarding the range of the conflict, interpersonal and intergroup conflict have been experienced and given reasons by all of the participants. However, interorganizational conflict was only mentioned by 10 of the participants. When the profile of the participants that experienced interorganizational conflict one way or another, it can be seen that 8 of the 10 participants are either ship master, or chief engineering officer. In addition, one of the remaining two is a first officer. In light of this information it can be argued that, as 9 of the 10 participants that experienced interorganizational conflict are those of higher responsibility in the context of ship hierarchy (3 ship masters, 4 chief engineers and 2 first officers), this range of conflict may not apply to all seafarers on board. Ship master is the commander of the ship and it is natural for that position to be in relation with other parties that are involved with the ship. First officer is the second man in command regarding the ship and the proxy of the master for the position of the commander of the deck department. Similarly, chief engineer is the commander of the engine department. Hence it is apparent that these positions come with more responsibility and more contact with other organizations in relation with the ship.

Table 3 shows the codes that are associated with each range of conflict and how many times it has been associated with that range by the participants.

**Table 3:** Code Relationship Matrix

<b>Codes</b>	<b>INTERPERSONAL</b>	<b>INTERGROUP</b>	<b>INTERORGANIZATIONAL</b>
hierarchy	8	2	0
culture-ethnicity-religion	5	7	0
culture-ethnicity-religion\politics	2	0	0
working hours	4	7	0
working conditions	1	0	0
working conditions\food	5	2	1
communication	5	2	0
distributive justice	3	3	0
performance pressure	1	0	8
job allocation	7	0	0
education	5	0	0
personal traits	6	2	0
ego	4	4	0
meritocracy	4	0	0
stress	6	0	0
stress\being away	3	0	0
stress\contract	7	0	0
alumni favoritism	0	4	0
age-generation gap	2	3	0
mobbing-grudge	2	2	0
role ambiguity	0	4	0
idleness	3	0	0
not meeting the demands	0	0	4
gender	1	1	0
wages	1	0	1
conflict resolution	1	1	0
exhaustion-burnout	2	0	0
gossip	0	0	0
alcohol	1	1	0

“Stress”, with its sub-codes “stress of being away” and “stress of long contracts”, have been related with interpersonal conflict 16 times, the most among all codes. Another finding on this code is that it is found to be in relation with interpersonal conflict only, not being named as a reason for intergroup or interorganizational conflict. Second most repeated codes were “hierarchy” and “job allocation” with 7 repetitions. The latter, in

similarity with “stress” was solely seen as a reason for interpersonal conflict, whereas hierarchy was also named as a reason for intergroup conflict twice. “Personal traits” was also mentioned six times as a reason for interpersonal conflict.

“Culture-ethnicity-religion” proved to be an important code as it has come up 7 times combined with its sub-code “politics”, as a reason for interpersonal conflict and 7 times as a reason for intergroup conflict. Participants noted people tend to form groups around their cultural, ethnic and/or religious identities. “Working hours” shared the first place with the previous code with 7 repetitions, regarding intergroup conflict. The main reason behind this is the fact that the two most obvious groups on board ships, deck department and engineering department, which are not formed naturally but structurally, work different hours while the ship is sailing and in port. Participants noted unrest brews, when one department is working while the other is off. “Alumni favoritism” and “role ambiguity” with four repetitions, are the two other leading reasons for intergroup conflict. Participants point out the ambiguous role of the fitter on board constantly causes conflict among deck and engineering departments.

When the reasons for conflict for interorganizational relations have been analyzed, there is a reason that comes across above and beyond any others and that is “performance pressure”. Each participant that experienced this range of conflict stated they are under extreme pressure to carry out their operations in shorter periods of time, consume less bunker, overwork the seafarers on board, by the demands of the charterer. Most of the time, these demands for improved performance requires non-compliance with international regulations such as the Maritime Labour Convention (2006) or Safety of Life at Sea (1974) as they essentially force the personnel to work longer hours, and/or force them to leave other urgent work on board undone, which can be a hazard for both safety and the security of the ship and its’ crew. The other important concept regarding interorganizational conflict is “not meeting the demands” of the ship. This phenomenon occurs between the ship and the ship owning/managing firm on matters such as supplies, spare parts, personnel changes and various demands from the ship side and the firm may not meet this demands or fall late in doing so, resulting in demoralized personnel and/or unfit ship.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

As stated before, while the problems of seafarers have been studied in the literature, they have not been studied in the context of conflict. However, the workplace conflict literature has studies that focuses on reasons for conflict and some of those reasons coincide with the findings of this study. The term “personality” which can be found in workplace literature is similar to “personal traits” code of this study as both define characteristics of a person in the workplace. “Mobbing-grudge” code of this study bears similarities to the term “spite”, however, due to the hierarchical structure on board ships, spites can turn into mobbing more often than not. “Education” is a term that represent exactly the same issue for both regular workplaces and the ship as a workplace and issues such as “time pressure” and “success criteria” are found to be present in the code “performance pressure in this study.

On the other hand, there are emerging codes that are very specific to ship as a workplace. Issues such as “hierarchy”, “food”, “alcohol”, “stress of being away” and “stress of long contracts” are not problems that every employee can encounter while working. The fact that this number of industry specific codes emerging is important for the seafaring profession as a labor-intensive job. Unique workplaces demand research since the studies on ordinary workplaces do not apply to them fully. In the literature review section of the study it was stated that other settings that are in some ways similar to seafaring were studied in the context of conflict. Police force may bear similarities due to its hierarchical structure, airways personnel may experience similar isolation. Regardless, each unique workplace requires special focus to understand the hardships faced to the fullest extent and this study provides a first glimpse to the conflict in seafarers’ workplace.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In accordance with the aim of this study, a total of 29 reasons for conflict for all ranges were found, while some may be less repeated than others, each one is experienced by a seafarer and thus is a reality that should always be in consideration. It can be concluded that the hierarchical structure, the first and main counter measure for conflict situations on board ships, is currently being perceived as one of the biggest reasons for interpersonal conflict, and a significant one for intergroup conflict. Secondly, even though the maritime transportation industry is international and multinational by its nature, diverse cultures, nations and beliefs still

experience friction when working together in the enclosed working space that is the ship. Thirdly, food is an essential issue for seafarers as it is their almost only “leisure” on board and can affect interpersonal, intergroup and interorganizational relationships.

There are some issues can be solved easily if ship owners/ship management firms are willing to spend more money such as stress caused by long contracts, or the position of the fitter in the organizational structure. Change of personnel is a costly matter and it is cheaper to keep a seafarer that is already on board but it is mostly done at the expense of said seafarer. The role ambiguity of the fitter can be resolved with employing one for each deck and engineering departments. Several other frequently mentioned issues can be improved by in-house education and training. Personal traits, meritocracy, education, and communication can be improved to some extent by appropriate training.

Performance pressure towards the ship is an issue that should be addressed as the ship and the seafarers on board are obligated to follow strict international rules and regulations, along with ensuring the safety and security of both life and cargo. Any concession on this front has the potential to result in a serious harm to all related parties.

All in all, conflict in seafarers’ workplace is ever present but not unavoidable or unpreventable. A thorough examination of the reasons for conflict that is presented in this study can improve the quality of life and work on board for seafarers and improve the performance of the ship as a whole. Furthermore, the study contributes to the seafarer literature by analyzing the reasons for conflict rather than the reasons themselves.

## **7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

As a qualitative study, this paper aims to explore the phenomenon of conflict and how it comes to be in the workplace of seafarers. The population of the study prevents it from producing output that can be generalized. Another issue about the population that it represents the experiences of Turkish seafarers only. It should be kept in mind that same experiences can be perceived differently by members of different nations.

Further research regarding this matter is currently being carried out by the author in the form of a PhD dissertation, where the reasons for conflict according to seafarers actively working on ships will be compared to those of human resources/personnel managers of ship owning and ship

managing companies in order to identify the differences and similarities of what each group describe as a reason for conflict. Furthermore, a competency requirement guide for conflict management skill will be developed for seafarers.

In addition, keeping in mind that this study was carried out with Turkish seafarers only, and the result of the study showing that culture and ethnicity plays a crucial part in conflict situations, studies focusing on different nations and cultures can be carried out by scholars to identify how they perceive reasons for conflict. In-depth analysis of the dominant reasons for conflict can be carried out in order to prevent or better manage this type of situations. Lastly it is proposed that a quantitative research on this matter can be carried out to cover a larger population for the purpose of generalization.

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