Perception of the conflict in the students of the Universidad Tecnológica de León

Percepción del conflicto en el estudiantado de la Universidad Tecnológica de León

HERNÁNDEZ-CASTILLO, Adolfo†, ARREDONDO-MUÑOZCANO, Ana María del Carmen, PADILLA-GUTIÉRREZ, Luz Aurora and GONZÁLEZ-ARREDONDO, Liliana

Universidad Tecnológica de León, Mexico.

ID 1st Author: Adolfo, Hernández-Castillo / ORC ID: 0000-0003-2105-1846, CVU CONACYT ID: 1014136

ID 1st Co-author: Ana María del Carmen, Arredondo-Muñozcano / **ORC ID:** 0000-0001-7252-6894, **CVU CONACYT ID:** 1014278.

ID 2nd Co-author: Luz Aurora, Padilla-Gutiérrez / ORC ID: 0000-0003-4183-8777, CVU CONACYT ID: 1014262

ID 3rd Co-author: *Liliana, González-Arredondo /* **ORC ID:** 0000-0002-1692-9602, **Researcher ID Thomson** S-8366-2018, **CVU CONACYT ID:** 563829

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Abstract

The objective of the work was to identify at the Technological University of León (UTL) the perception that students of the Higher Technical University level (TSU) have of conflict as a basis for promoting actions for a culture of non-violence and peace. To this end, a diagnostic instrument was developed and applied to the student population of the first semester of all careers, in the period September-December 2020. Subsequently, the analysis was carried out and the results were organized into four categories of the conflict: a. Purpose of the conflict; b. Perspective of the conflict; c. Cultural beliefs; d. Conditions of Conflict. The results show that the students of the UTL perceive conflict only in its dysfunctional modality that affects interpersonal relationships; it also considers that conflict depends on each person's interpretation of the external stimulus; the degree of ignorance that culture itself influences the perception of conflict is highlighted; finally, there is consensus that most conflicts are the result of a poor organizational structure. Based on these results, the aspects that must be considered to elaborate strategies to build an environment of culture of peace are highlighted.

Resumen

El objetivo del trabajo fue identificar en la Universidad Tecnológica de León (UTL) la percepción que los estudiantes del nivel Técnico Superior Universitario (TSU) tienen del conflicto como base para promover acciones por una cultura de no violencia y paz. Para ello, se elaboró y aplicó un instrumento de diagnóstico a la población estudiantil del primer cuatrimestre de todas las carreras, en el periodo septiembre-diciembre del 2020. Posteriormente, se realizó el análisis y los resultados se organizaron en cuatro categorías del conflicto: a. Propósito del conflicto; b. Perspectiva del conflicto; c. Creencias culturales; d. Condiciones del conflicto. Los resultados dejan ver que el estudiantado de la UTL percibe al conflicto solo en su modalidad disfuncional que afecta las relaciones interpersonales; también considera que el conflicto depende de la interpretación que cada persona haga del estímulo externo; se resalta el grado del desconocimiento de que la propia cultura influye en la percepción del conflicto; por último, existe consenso de que la mayoría de los conflictos son el resultado de una estructura organizacional deficiente. A partir de estos resultados, se destacan los aspectos que deben considerarse para elaborar estrategias para construir un ambiente de cultura de paz.

Conflict, Culture, Tolerance

Conflicto, Cultura, Tolerancia

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[†] Researcher contributing as first author.

Introduction

Different ways of being and perceiving reality is what makes people unique, with needs and desires that in many cases may even be opposed, which is often the basis of social conflicts. To paraphrase German Silva (2008), conflict itself is not the root of problems, it is only the manifestation of the way in which diversity is managed. In fact, a conflict can be managed in such a way that it can foster social cohesion or promote a favourable change for society; but, if one does not learn to negotiate, or if one does not develop the value of tolerance for diversity, then the conflict will manifest itself in some form of violence (Silva García, 2008).

If we look at the etymological origin, the term conflict comes from two Latin words: cum, company; and fligĕre, blow, hence it is associated with the idea of a "fight" between two or more people. But this "fight" is sometimes with oneself; this notion is expressed in the dictionary of the Real Academia de la Lengua Española, in its 23rd edition, which defines conflict as the coexistence of contradictory tendencies in the individual capable of generating anguish and neurotic disorders (Real Academia Española, 2022, conflict).

Regardless of whether the conflict is external or internal, the important thing is to understand its nature in order to take advantage of and enhance its functional aspects and minimise its negative effects, so that it becomes a source of personal and social development, thus favouring a culture of peace. This is the purpose of this paper.

Perception and conflict

Perception is a mechanism that allows us to establish a link with the world around us. According to the Royal Spanish Academy, perception is the inner sensation that results from a material impression produced by the senses (Real Academia Española, 2022, percepción), but it also includes an interpretation of what is perceived as symbols, whose meanings depend on many factors, including previous experiences, the state of mind, the circumstance in which the symbol appears, the personality of the individuals, among others.

This consideration of perception is extremely important because this is where we find the source of most interpersonal conflicts. A word, a gesture, an action or omission, etc., becomes a source of conflict when one or more people perceive it as a threat to their self, to their emotional and personal stability, to their belief system; and the response to this threat will manifest itself either in the form of competition (fighting for a good considered scarce) or dissent (differences of opinion) (Vold, 1967, cited by Germán Silva, 2008). When such competition or dissent corresponds to the perception of social groups or communities, we speak of social divergence. In terms of Germán Silva (2012), divergence refers to the recognition of diversity (Silva García, 2012), and then we move from the level of interpersonal conflicts to that of social conflicts and, in both cases, the source of conflict will always be perception, so we can already see the importance of dialogue as the best alternative for its resolution.

Conflict management and culture of peace

According to Silva García (2012), social divergence is the manifestation of dissent involving diversity of beliefs and values:

"The concept of social divergence refers to a dynamic process of interaction between lines of social action that maintain a dialectical relationship, which generate a field of separation when distinguished by differences on interests, attitudes or ideologies existing between their agents, which can provoke conflict and represents a situation of diversity." (Silva García, 2012)

According to the above definition, divergence generates a separation between social groups which, at the same time, is the space of interaction for dialogue; the question here is how big is that separation that will constitute the margin of tolerance between different perceptions, so that there is room for agreements. The value of Tolerance is based on respect for the ideas, beliefs or practices of others when they are different or contrary to one's own (Real Academia Española, 2022), but such respect is based, in turn, on the recognition of the dignity of the person, which should not be subject to arbitrary interpretations. In this sense, a culture of peace can only be built when conflict management is based on the recognition of human dignity.

On the basis of tolerance, the next step is to reflect together on the external and internal causes of conflict between people or social groups, with the intention of finding effective solutions not only in the short term, but also in the long term.

Conflicts can occur on a personal or social level, and in any sphere, be it in the family, with friends, at work, or with a country's system of government, among others. How to deal with conflict will depend on the context and the type of conflict: whether it has arisen from a clash of personalities, which may be fortuitous; or whether it is the result of a social structure that systematically produces conflict - sometimes conflict exists because of the way a work team is organised, and often it may be the result of generic thinking derived from one's own culture.

The perception of conflict generates different attitudes. The response to the conflict situation will depend on whether it is perceived as functional or dysfunctional, whether it is seen as real or dependent on our perception, or whether it is the product of individual experiences or a reflection of our own culture; even the response will vary depending on whether the conflict is seen as arising from a clash of personalities or simply as a result of poor organisation.

The above issues can be summarised in the following categories of perception of conflict

- Purpose. This refers to what is expected from the conflict. It will be functional if the conflict is perceived as an opportunity to strengthen interpersonal relationships and generate identity; or dysfunctional, if it is only seen as an obstacle and affects social interaction.
- Perspective. This is the consideration of whether the conflict is objective (coming from the outside), or subjective (that an event is interpreted as conflictive, according to the experience of each individual). This makes it possible to understand why what may seem conflictive to one person may not be to another).

- Beliefs. This is the assumption that the conflict is perceived personally or whether it is recognised as a result of the influence of the socio-cultural environment. This category is extremely important, because it is difficult for individuals to realise the influence of their own culture unless they have the opportunity to learn about the diversity of other cultures, which allows for the recognition of both commonalities and differences.
 - Conditions. This refers to the behavioural and organisational aspect. Conflicts are perceived as arising from the specific behaviours of each individual, i.e. when it is considered that by "nature" there are people who are conflictual for teamwork and others who are more affable; or it is perceived that it all boils down to a problem of organisational structure or lack of planning, so that if the right structural conditions are in place, conflicts will be considerably reduced.

Problem statement

Since 2020, the Technological University of León, in collaboration with ANUIES (National Association of Universities and Education Institutions), has formed a Culture of Peace Committee, whose purpose is to generate actions that contribute to the creation of peaceful and non-violent environments. Several working groups were established, one of which was specifically designated to develop research projects on this topic. One of the first tasks was identify the educational community's perception of conflict so that, on the basis of these notions, concrete actions to prevent and resolve conflicts could be justified. To this end, it was decided to start with the student body, specifically with the newly admitted students, in the period September-December 2020; the question that guided this study was: What is the perception that the student body of the Universidad Tecnológica de León has of conflict? Subsequently, as a result of the information obtained, strategies for conflict resolution and management would be designed.

General objective

The general objective of the research was to identify the perception that students at the Universidad Tecnológica de León (UTL) have of conflict as a basis for promoting actions for a culture of non-violence and peace.

Method

The method used was exploratory, in order to find out roughly the ideas that the students had about conflict, as well as their empirical way of handling it.

A simple questionnaire was developed and applied to a random sample stratified by gender, shifts, campus and academic area in order to identify the student body's idea or perception of the conflict and, consequently, to find elements for its adequate management. For this study, only the Central Campus and Campus II were considered, and the Acámbaro Campus was omitted. The survey was applied to 1215 students in the first semester of the period September-December 2020, which represented 40.5% of the newly admitted population, of which 613 were female (50.5%) and 602 were male (49.5%). Table 1 shows the sociodemographic data from the survey:

Total respondents	Gender		Shift		Campus		Área	
1215	Female (1321)	613	Morning	1038	Central Campus	868	Economic- administrative	571
			Evening	154	-		Electromechanics	335
	Male	602	Evening	23	Campus	347	Sustainability	110
	(1679)		depressurised		II		ICT	199

Table 1 Socio-demographic data from the survey *Source: UTL 2020*

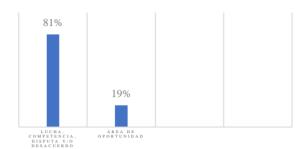
Results

The survey responses were classified under the four headings of conflict described above: purpose, perspective, beliefs and conditions.

Purpose of conflict

When most people hear the term "conflict", they almost certainly associate it with fights, misunderstandings, anger, disagreements, etc., and few see it as functional, in the sense that it is conducive to change, strengthens interpersonal bonds or helps resolve disagreements. Of the 1215 respondents, 85% associated the term "conflict" with fighting, competition, dispute and disagreement (Graphic 1), and almost 70% considered it to be more of a problem than an opportunity (Graphic 2).

IN YOUR CONCEPT OF CONFLICT, YOU ASSOCIATE THE WORD WITH...



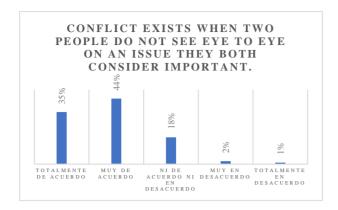
Graphic 1 Concept of conflict *Source: UTL 2020*



Graphic 2 Consequences of conflict *Source: UTL 2020*

Perspective of the conflict

Conflict can be considered from an objective perspective, that is, as an event that happens to the individual, for which he/she has no control or responsibility; in this sense, it is an independent reality that is alien to the person, and forms part of the circumstances that inevitably occur and we can only respond to them. For its part, the subjective perspective implies the interpretation that an individual makes of what happens to him or her and values it as conflictive or not. In any case, both perspectives do not contradict each other, on the contrary, they complement each other, so the interest was rather to identify whether the students perceived complementarity or whether they were inclined towards one of the perspectives. The survey showed a tendency to consider the subjective aspect of conflict and that different opinions on the same issue - dissent - is an important source of conflict, as shown in graphic 3:



Graphic 3 Causes of conflict *Source: UTL*, 2020

Beliefs

This aspect is perhaps the most difficult to identify because, although there is a tacit recognition of the influence of culture, the reality is that many of the beliefs are housed in the subconscious and are manifested through behaviours that are rarely rationalised. According to Antonio Díez (2017), cultural heritage is the a priori framework through which people apprehend reality; it is constituted by socially assumed beliefs that are housed in the subconscious, and are the background of conscious ideas (Díez Patricio, 2017). In other a discourse can be consciously constructed on a given topic, but what gives it meaning is the belief, which constitutes the cultural framework of both the sender and the receiver.

The way to recognise the originality of one's own beliefs, or whether they are the result of the culture in which one lives, is through knowledge of other cultures. Only when the individual meets people from other places can he/she identify commonalities and differences in ways of thinking and being, which allows for an evaluation of the respective belief systems.

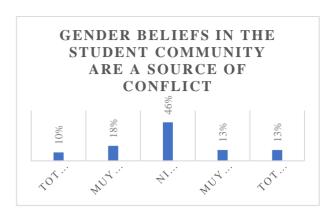
G. Hofstede (1980), cited by Lucas Marín (2013) was a social psychologist who conducted a study at IBM to identify cultural differences in all IBM subsidiaries around the world, to show how cultural environments influenced the culture of organisations. From his study, six basic dimensions emerged that have allowed for the identification of cultural differences in organisations (Hofstede, 1980):

- Hierarchical distance is the difference between egalitarianism and authoritarianism. Hofstede found that countries such as Denmark and Austria showed more egalitarian attitudes, in contrast to the Philippines or Mexico where authoritarianism is experienced as an everyday occurrence.
- Individualism-collectivism. It is the difference between individual and collective work. Here, too, notable differences can be seen, for example, a country like the United States promotes more individualistic work, in contrast to the community dimension in countries like Colombia or Taiwan.
- Control of uncertainty. It is the gap between the desire for security and the acceptance of risk. Some cultures are entrepreneurial and therefore risk-taking, while others prefer stability and therefore avoid risk-taking.
 - Long-term orientation. It is the distance between valuing the future and the present. Cultures that value the future seek long-term rewards, value thrift, perseverance and the ability to adapt. Those who value the present seek rewards in the short term.
 - **Gender attitude**. It refers to the naming of masculine and feminine cultures as a product of the social construction of a particular community. There are cultures whose concept of the feminine includes the importance of social relations and service, while the masculine is associated with achieving goals and earning a salary, as a status of power. In other cultures, however, these concepts are quite the demonstrated opposite, as hv anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday's (2002) study in Indonesia, where she found communities where men and women do not compete with each other, and where women control the land through inheritance (Peggy Reeves, 2002).

Forbearance vs restraint, is the difference between a self-indulgent or repressive attitude to life. Work is a clear example of this: there are countries like Canada or Denmark whose attitude to work is one of balance with personal and social life; but there are others, like Mexico, where rest or leisure is often perceived as the enemy of productivity, turning people into virtual slaves or workaholics.

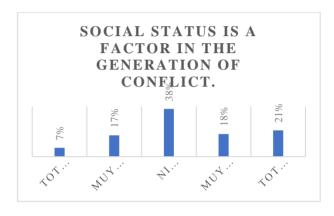
pole of Hofstede's Each (1980)dimensions gives a cultural context that explains the perception of conflict. For example, in the case of "hierarchical distance", if people in an organisation consider authoritarianism to be an inherent feature of the boss's role, if they are subordinates they will tend towards submissive obedience or silent complaint; they will think that, after all, "that's the way things are"; and, if they are in a position of power, they are likely to reproduce authoritarian attitudes, and this will be so because of role beliefs that are permeated by the culture. The same can be said for each and every dimension, the point is that people naturally do not realise this until they compare their way of looking at reality with that of someone else. This invisibility of cultural influence is behind most conflicts, which is why it is so important to work on a strategy to make them visible in order to improve the conditions for reaching real agreements.

For this reason, the survey included questions on whether cultural and gender beliefs are a source of conflict. It was to be expected that they would deny or minimise the influence of such beliefs on the perception of conflict, but the question was asked anyway to confirm the assumption. Thus, 46% remained neutral (Graphic 4), and the rest were polarised between those who did acknowledge the influence of the beliefs (10% Strongly Agree, 18% Strongly Agree) versus those who denied it (13% Strongly Agree, 13% Strongly Disagree). The same was true for the questions on social status (Graphic 5) and ideologies (Graphic 6); they were expected to maintain a neutral stance:



Graphic 4 Perception of conflict according to gender beliefs

Source: UTL, 2020



Graphic 5 Perception of conflict according to social status *Source: UTL*, 2020

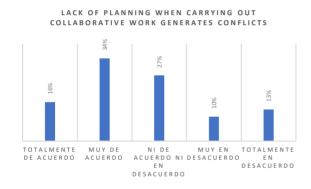


Graphic 6 Perception of conflict according to ideology *Source: UTL, 2020*

Neutrality with respect to questions about beliefs reaffirms the idea that their influence is not consciously perceived. For that reason, ideas about whether a boss should be authoritarian or not, whether individual or team work is better, whether safety is better than risk, whether it is right to expect someone to be a man or a woman, or whether to be more self-congratulatory or not, will depend on culturally inherited beliefs.

Conditions

Conflict can be seen as a result of diversity or as a reflection of an organisational structure. The former refers to the very diverse personalities within groups and the roles they play in collaborative work. For example, there are dominant and follower personalities; introverted and extroverted people; aggressive, passive or assertive people; men and women with a wide range of ideas about gender roles, politics, religion, sports and other issues. This diversity is potentially a source of conflict, but perhaps the real problem is not the diversity itself, but the way in which individuals are organised, which makes conflict the result of an unjust or simply badly structured system. And it is precisely this idea that conflict stems mainly from a lack of planning (Graphic 7), organisation and structure (Graphic 8), which stood out in the survey with almost 50% of the respondents (Graphic 9):



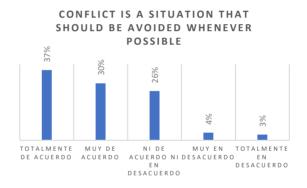
Graphic 7 Source of conflict due to lack of planning *Source: UTL 2020*



Graphic 8 The source of the conflict due to disorganization *Source: UTL 2020*

Discussion

In addition to the students' perception of conflict, they were asked about the ways in which they commonly deal with conflict. Almost 70% of students were inclined to seek to avoid conflict whenever possible (Graphic 9); but if it inevitably occurs and affects them directly, they do try to resolve the conflict through dialogue (Graphic 10). Regarding the item on what they do if they have a conflict with colleagues, 76% of respondents chose the option "I look for a solution that involves a compromise on both sides" (Graphic 11). On the other hand, if they witness a conflict, 23% stated that they do not seek to get involved (Graphic 12), but almost 70% answered that they do try to intervene so that the conflict disappears or diminishes (Graphic 13).



Graphic 9 Conflict avoidance *Source: UTL 2020*

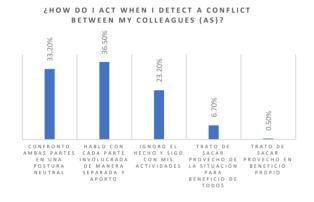


Graphic 10 Evasive action in the face of conflict *Source: UTL 2020*

HOW DO I ACT WHEN I HAVE A CONFLICT WITH MY GROUP MATES?



Graphic 11 Acting in the face of conflict *Source: UTL 2020*



Graphic 12 Acting in the face of conflict *Source: UTL 2020*



E N D E S A C U E R D O

Graphic 14 Acting in the face of conflict *Source: UTL 2020*

Conclusions

UTL students perceive conflict mainly in its dysfunctional form, i.e. as a problem that affects interpersonal relationships, and consider that whether or not it is considered a conflict, to a greater or lesser degree, depends on the interpretation that each person makes of external stimuli, as well as the influence of their own emotions. There is a clear lack of knowledge of the degree to which one's own culture influences perceptions of conflict, and this is precisely one of the best areas in which to work on new projects.

Finally, there was a consensus that many of the conflicts are the result of poor organisational structure or poor planning, so there is a need to develop these kinds of skills.

Given these results, the challenge now is to develop a plan to harness this knowledge in building a peaceful environment, and the following points should be taken into account:

- Recognise conflict as an area of opportunity. It is necessary to highlight the functional aspect of conflict as an agent of change and as a way to improve interpersonal relations and generate identity as a group.
- Promote the development of emotional intelligence. The interpretation of external stimuli as conflictive also depends on emotions, which is why an adequate management of them will help in the regulation of the perception of conflicts and their assertive resolution.
- Making the cultural beliefs that lead to conflict visible. It is necessary to develop a strategy to create awareness of those cultural ideas that exist in general and that, in the end, systematically lead to conflicts.
- Develop planning and organisational skills. Recognising that most of the conflicts in an organisation stem from a deficient organisational structure or planning, it is necessary to work on administrative models based on respect for human needs, as well as on the development of planning strategies.

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