
**EFFECT OF SOCIAL DISTANCE ON RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT AND
JOB SATISFACTION IN SAUDI EDUCATION SECTOR**

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Abstract

The existence of psychological social distance between employees in organizations may be seen to have positive or negative consequences in organizations. Although many studies were conducted, there is little agreement on the consequences of social distance. Moreover, there is lack of research in the area in Saudi Arabia. Such conflicting effects and shortage suggest that we should learn more about how social distance affects organizational outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect of social distance on both relationship conflict and job satisfaction. The data was obtained from 413 officials in the education sector in Saudi Arabia. Results suggest that social distance has significant effects on both relationship conflict and job satisfaction. High social distance was found to have significant positive effect on relationship conflict and significant negative effect on job satisfaction. These results suggest that high social distance is a negative phenomenon that should be reduced in organizations. The implications of these results were discussed.

Keywords: social distance, relationship conflict, job satisfaction, education sector, Saudi Arabia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Organisations are perceived to be social systems where employees are different based on the nature of their qualifications, ethnicities, races, religious affiliations and cultural orientation amongst other areas of differences (Bell & Hartmann, 2012). Despite such differences, promoting a culture of respect and sensitivity towards the values, norms and talents of others in organizations is vital in promoting productivity, cohesion and eliminating tension and conflicts in organisation. It means that the ability of the organisation to promote collaborative relationships is crucial in determining the levels of employees' satisfaction that directly impacts on their commitment and willingness to remain with the organisation (Ancis, Sedlacek & Mohr, 2012).

Social distance measures the extent to which employees and other people within organizations show cooperative behavior, emotional acceptability of other social groups, and understanding of each other. It means the degree to which individuals perceive social differences among other groups desire to associate with them (Maurer, 2013). Social distance term was used traditionally to describe class, cultural, and ethnic differences between people, lately the term was also used to describe the psychological distance and attraction between individuals (Chai, 2016). However, psychological distance is different from physical distance. Employees may be located close to each other physically but they are far away psychologically from each other (Wilson et. al.,

2008). Accordingly, psychological distance is defined as the emotional feeling of closeness or separation from another person due to certain factors such as differences in status, culture, expertise, identification, races, and ethnicity (Brunelle, 2013; Gebert, Buengeler & Heinitz, 2017; Salzman and Grasha, 1991).

The issue of social distance is a common phenomenon in workplaces, especially in a country like Saudi Arabia due to the increased migration and interaction of individuals in this era of globalisation. Individuals from one location seek to have job or practice their careers in other locations where differences such as culture, religion, ethnicity, race, expertise and communication styles amongst other aspects abound. Therefore, research is needed to investigate whether such distance generates positive or negative results to organizations and employees.

Nevertheless, results from literature of the effects of social distance show conflicting results. Some studies show that social distance have positive effects on relationships. For example, Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin (2012) highlight that there is ability of close people at the workplace to enhance the levels of job satisfaction and goal. However, other studies show negative or no effect. A recent study by Ayub and Jehn, (2018) found that social distance is expected to generate negative feelings that can create conflict in workplaces. However, almost no studies tackled this issue in the context of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the objective of this study is to shed light in this area and explore the effects of social distance on relationship conflict and job satisfaction in Saudi Arabia.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Based on social identity theory, people are attracted to each other because they share the same beliefs and attitudes. The sharing of attitudes and beliefs forms critical antecedent that determines the level of nature of interpersonal attraction (Gebert et al., 2017). Accordingly high level of interaction between group members lead to reduction of distance between group members and increase of distance between the group and other groups in organizations (Nason et al., 2018). However, Fries-Britt, Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, Milem, and Howard (2011) highlight that the ability of some of the employees, especially those that are the majority, to identify with an in-group based on their shared characteristics could breed resentment towards those perceived to be from the out-groups thereby undermining the quality of interactions. Consequently, tensions between the different groups of employees emerge as a result of the social categorization as the members of the in-group believe they are superior over those of the out-group. Eventually, the employees of the out-group experience low self-esteem and unwillingness to remain with the organisation.

Tatli and Özbilgin (2011) supports the views and adds that it is necessary for entities to devise strategies of managing distance to limit the likelihood of conflicts as the increased interdependence amongst employees is the main driver of creativity in organisations. Through the adoption of inclusion policies and multiculturalism, the organisation benefits as employees develop increased efforts to understand their colleagues and engaging them to understand their different perceptions and ideas that is the hallmark of the evolution of creative ideas. Also, the expression of the different viewpoints and ideas due to the close distance of the workforce

reduces the likelihood of groupthink, thereby promoting collegial relationships where everyone feels equal and not dominated by individuals from any demographic group or origin (Al Ariss et.al., 2013). In such workplace groups, the employees experience increased levels of knowledge sharing and flexibility as they explore the efficacy of the different perspectives provided by their colleagues.

Acker (2006) adds that there are other forms of conflicts that are witnessed in organisations that emanate from the entrenchment of oppressive attitudes and behaviours amongst sections of employees towards others. In such workplaces, there are dominant and marginalised groups of workers and the levels of interaction are minimal. Such forms of oppression emerge from factors such as racism and sexism, where some individuals develop chauvinistic ideas that disregard the beliefs and norms of others and perceive them as backward, inadequate and inefficient. For instance, some of the migrants are treated in a discriminatory manner even in workplaces in total disregard of their qualifications and capabilities. Some of the management personnel are oblivious of the skills and capabilities possessed by such immigrants and fail to develop tangible approaches to how such capabilities can be harnessed (Bell & Hartmann, 2007).

Shore, Cleveland, and Sanchez (2018) highlight that the management of organisations must demonstrate high levels of emotional intelligence and cultural competencies to understand the different cultures, belief systems and identities that are represented in the organisation. They must then develop approaches that promote the synergistic engagement amongst these diverse forms of presentations to ensure the organisation is not held at ransom due to the ensuing differences. The optimal management of the various social identities must also reflect the ability of the employees to align their personal beliefs and goals with those of the organisation to ensure there are common points of interactions even as they seek to protect their identities (Gmelch, Kay, & Lovrich, 2014).

3. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

This section presents theoretical review of the three constructs in this research; social distance, relationship, and job satisfaction and develops hypothesized relationships between them.

3.1. Social Distance and Relationship Conflict

Relationship conflict happens at the time of interpersonal incongruities among team members which usually include annoyance, animosity and tension (Hansen, 2015). Based on social identity theory, in the absence of interaction between people to properly understand each other, some of the individuals from one groups may perceive their colleagues from other groups as naïve or inferior and fails to develop any deeper understanding of the attributes of such colleagues due to stereotypical attitudes and beliefs (Fries-Britt, et. al., 2011; Nason, Bacq & Gras, 2018). Such negative perception may create relationship conflict.

Close relationships between individuals promotes the ability of the individuals to exchange information and viewpoints that can reduce any misunderstanding or conflicts between the individuals. Also, expression of viewpoints and ideas can clarify the roles and responsibilities of each member which can lead to increased cooperation and reduction in role conflict between

members, especially between individuals that have lower levels of tolerance between each other (Bradley, et.al., 2015; Gebert, et al., 2017). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Increased social distance will increase relationship conflict in organizations

3.2. Social Distance and Job Satisfaction

Close collegial relationships was traditionally viewed as positive thing in organizational settings because it was found to be generally associated with positive organizational consequences such as task performance, job satisfaction, information sharing, and cognitive functioning of group members (Qi and Armstrong, 2019). In contrast, social isolation between organizational members is related to negative emotional interactions such as frustration, anger, fear, distress and negative emotions (Lehmann-Willenbrock, Grohmann & Kauffeld, 2011). Moreover, social separation can create an unfavourable environment, which normally increases negative affections, non-collaborative and misattribution team behaviour, that results in unsuccessful performance and functioning of teams (de Wit, Jehn and Scheepers, 2013; Edmondson & Smith, 2006).

Highly socially distant groups will lead people to have negative attitudes toward each other which often convert to low job satisfaction (Mohammed and Angell, 2004). Workgroups that show low level of social and interpersonal interactions are less likely to exhibit support of each other and building of mutual trust (Harrison and Klein, 2007). Therefore, mutual understanding must be enhanced to promote sensitivity towards the beliefs and values of others. The organisations having closely related team members can easily cope up with conflicting relations and complex tasks (Wankel, 2008). Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H2: Increased social distance will decrease job satisfaction in organizations.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve its objectives and test the hypotheses, this study conducted a survey using electronic questionnaire sent to participants from the education sector in Saudi Arabia. This method was employed in the study because of its advantage of covering wide geographical area with convenience and reduced time and costs (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006).

4.1. Sample and Data

The target respondents in this study consists of 500 individuals at managerial and professional levels working in educational organisations in both private and government sectors in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Since understanding and answering of questionnaire requires qualified, experienced, and knowledgeable persons, the survey targeted persons at high levels in these organizations such as managers and their deputies, heads of departments and senior employees. The individuals were contacted through e-mails to get their consent to participate in the study. Of the 500 contacted, 413 agreed to participate in the study and filled the online questionnaire correctly, for a response rate of 82.6%.

Most respondents are middle aged, between 31-45 years (75%) with a mean of 36 years, and around 33% of them are male. The sample was composed of individuals with long work experience; 26.4% of respondents have experience between 11 to 20 years, 28.1% between 6 to

10 years, and the rest are less than 6 years of experience. Most of the respondents are Saudi nationals (75.3%) and the rest are from other countries. Moreover, the sample shows that the respondents split almost equally between government and private sector organizations.

4.2. Measures and Procedure

The measurement scales of the three main variables in this study (social distance, relationship conflict, and job satisfaction) was obtained mainly from previous studies and adapted to reflect the situation in Saudi Arabia. A six-item scale to measure Social Distance was adapted from De Wit et al., (2013), Antonakis and Atwater (2002), and Erskine (2012) (see Table II). The scale was measured by five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly agree" to 5=" strongly disagree". This means that 1 indicates low social distance i.e., the respondents are highly close to each other, while 5 indicates high social distance which means that the respondents are psychologically separated from each other.

Relationship conflict was measured by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree". The scale was adapted from Jehn and Mannix (2001), Jehn (1995). Similarly, job satisfaction was measured by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree". The scale was adapted from Chang (2013), Jayakumar et al., (2009), Gmelch et al. (2014). The scales were first pre-tested by sending them to some academicians to test their content validity. Comments from the academicians were considered in designing the final version of the questionnaire.

The study utilizes Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and SmartPLS version 3.2.9 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker 2015). The PLS algorithm estimates the path coefficients and other model parameters by maximizing the explained variance of dependent constructs and minimizing the unexplained variance (Hair, et. al., 2017). PLS is more appropriate because it do not require prior requirements regarding sample size and data distribution, The reporting of findings follows general guidelines for reporting results of PLS structural equation model suggested by Hair et. al. (2017), including evaluation of the measurement model and the structural model as well as quality criteria for the overall model. The significance test were determined by running 5,000 bootstrap samples and 413 cases.

5. RESULTS

The following subsections present the results of PLS-SEM analysis of survey data. We start by presenting the results of the measurement model followed by the results of structural model.

5.1. Evaluation of the Measurement Model

The purpose of evaluating the measurement model is to test validity and reliability of variable measurements. In this study, validity of the measurements was measured using both convergent and discriminant validity measures. Whereas internal consistency reliability was gauged using Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability. Table II shows the indicators that we use to measure each variable, their means and standard deviations, as well as outer loadings and variance inflation factor (VIF) for each indicator and the averages of the whole measures. VIFs was used to determine whether there were multicollinearity between variables and items in this study. The

critical levels of the multicollinearity existence are VIF above 5 (Gujarati, 2011). As shown in the table, all VIFs were lower than 2.6 which indicates that there was no multicollinearity problem (Hair et al., 1998).

Table II: Mean, standard deviation and factor loading

Code	Items	Mean	Std. Dev	Loading	VIF
<i>Social Distance</i>					
611	I consider my co-workers as close friends	3.69	1.03	0.735	1.631
622	The employees at my workplace take part in activities together	3.88	0.90	0.725	1.532
644	My coworker and my families are close to each other	2.67	1.02	0.607	1.346
655	My workplace is quite efficient at arranging a trip	2.74	1.17	0.71	1.246
666	Employees at my workplace usually exchange messages in occasions	4.08	0.97	0.592	1.489
677	We usually communicate regularly through social media networks	3.96	0.97	0.707	1.529
	Average				
<i>Relationship Conflict</i>					
811	There is relationship tension in my workgroup	2.82	1.13	0.756	2.418
822	People in my workgroup get angry while working with each other	2.79	1.09	0.752	2.434
833	There is emotional conflict among employees in my organization	2.80	1.08	0.658	1.758
855	I do not trust my colleagues	2.27	1.01	0.775	2.118
866	There are personality clashes between me and my colleagues	2.99	1.15	0.762	1.738
877	My workgroup is not cohesive	2.60	1.14	0.861	2.584
888	There is a communication problem in our workgroup	2.58	1.15	0.863	2.271
	Average				
<i>Job Satisfaction</i>					
911	The current job measures up to my expectations	3.04	1.16	0.472	1.687
922	I am satisfied with my job	3.67	1.12	0.611	1.776
933	I am generally satisfied with my organization	3.27	1.21	0.670	1.971
944	I am satisfied with the colleagues I work with	3.72	0.98	0.900	1.547
966	I am satisfied with the flexibility and authority given to me	3.47	1.13	0.615	1.776
977	I am satisfied with the policies of my organization	3.21	1.16	0.744	2.025
988	I am satisfied with the type of work I am assigned	3.71	1.00	0.684	1.906
	Average				

The table shows that most outer loadings are higher than or close to the threshold of 0.70 and all of them are highly significant ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, table III shows that all estimates of average variance extracted (AVE) were higher than the threshold of 0.5 level (Fornell and Larker, 1981). These results indicates high convergent validity of the measures. Discriminate validity was measured in this study by taking the square root of AVE of each variable and compare it with the correlations of other latent variables (Fornell and Larker, 1981). All the squared roots of AVE are higher than other correlations which indicate high discriminant validity of the measures (see Table III). Table III shows that Cronbach's alpha for the three constructs were above 0.7. similarly, all the constructs show high composite reliability with values equal to or more than 0.835. Therefore, these results show adequate validity and reliability for all the measurements of constructs.

Table III: Reliability and AVE results

	Cronbach α	Composite Reliability	AVE	1	2	3
Job Satisfaction	0.856	0.889	0.535	0.73		
Relationship Conflict	0.897	0.919	0.618	-0.52	0.79	
Social Distance	0.763	0.835	0.519	-0.53	0.54	0.68

5.2. Evaluation of the Structural Model

Table IV and Fig. I show the results of the structural model for testing the relationships in the study. The path coefficients β between Social distance and both job satisfaction and relationship conflict indicate that there is statistically significant effect of social distance on both variables ($p - value < 0.01$). The effect social distance on relationship conflict is positive which means that higher social distance (people are far from each other) the higher relationship conflict between these people. However, the effect of social distance on job satisfaction is negative, which means that higher social distance is expected to lead to lower job satisfaction. Beside β , effect size f^2 was used to test the effects of social distance. Effect sizes above 0.35, 0.15, and 0.02 indicate substantial, moderate, and weak effects (Cohen, et.al. 2003). Therefore, the effect sizes of 0.39 and 0.40 indicates substantial effects of social distance on both relationship conflict and job satisfaction.

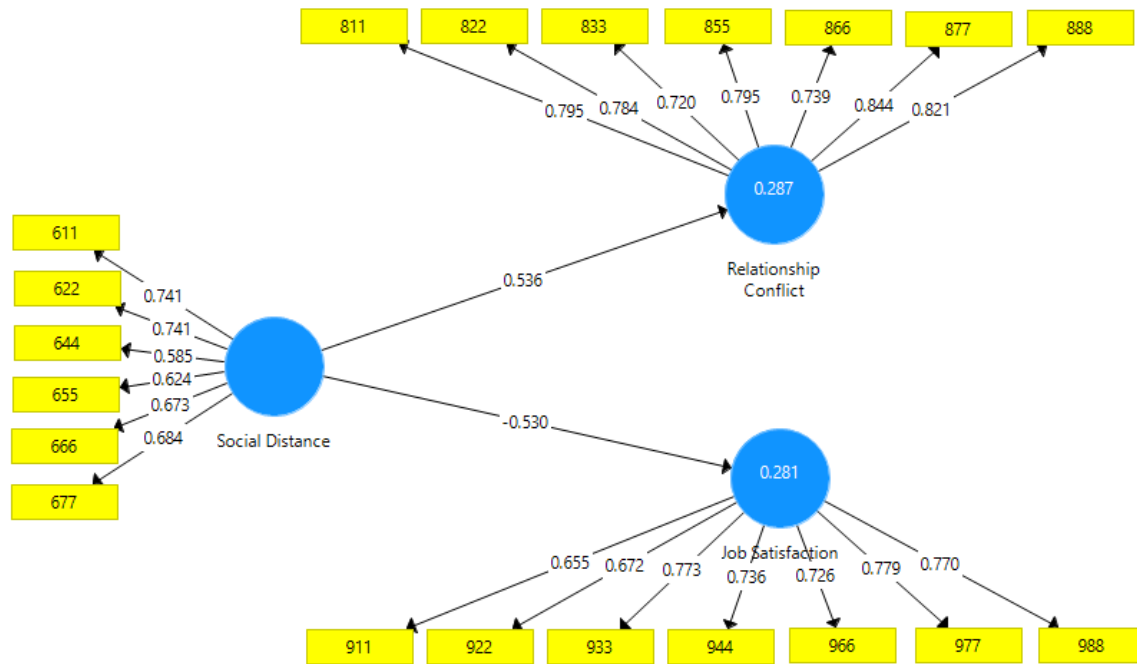


Figure 1: Results of the Study Relationships

The coefficient of determination R^2 measures the model's predictive power. R^2 for both relationships is around 0.28 which indicates that there is a moderate predictive power of social distance, it explains around 28% of variance in relationship conflict and job satisfaction (Hair et al. 2017). This means that there other variables, other than social distance that account for the variance independent variables.

Table IV: Results of the Structural Model

	β	R^2	Q^2	f^2
Job Satisfaction	-0.530**	0.281	0.329	0.391
Relationship Conflict	0.536**	0.287	0.458	0.403
Social Distance	-	-	0.239	-

6. DISCUSSION

The overall objective of this study is to explore the effect of social distance on both relationship conflict and job satisfaction in the Saudi context. Social distance refers to degree of familiarity, nearness, and intimacy that the participant perceived in their working environment. As anticipated, the results of this study support the existence of significant positive effect of social distance on relationship conflict, as well as significant negative effect of social distance on job satisfaction.

These results are interesting and tends to support the idea that social distance, the degree to which people in the workplace are psychologically far from or close to each other, is playing important role in reducing relationship conflicts and improving job satisfaction in the workplace. These results that the higher social distance between employees, the more likely that relationship conflict will occur and the more likely these employees will be less satisfied at work. These results are consistent with the previous findings of Mohammed and Angell (2004) who found that highly diverse work groups will lead the group members to not have positive attitudes towards each other which often translates into relationship conflict. More recently, Qi and Armstrong (2019) asserted that individual differences in cognitive style and low levels of social interactions may represent important components contributing to relationship conflicts. Moreover, Ayoub and Jehn (2018) found that national separation negatively relates to performance and positively relates to conflict. Additionally, the study of Sinkovics and Penz (2009) suggest that social distance acts as a strategy to avoid conflicts.

Our research suggests that the tendency of people to be close to each other, especially in the Saudi work environments, may represent on important element that contributes to successful mitigations of workplace conflicts and making employees more satisfied. Therefore, our results highlight the importance of relationship culture in countries such as Saudi Arabia which upholds the cultural values of maintaining social relationships between employers, employees, and working colleagues in general (Noor & Mohammed, 2016). Conversely, as people are far from each other, especially if accompanied by showing anger to the other person, showing contempt or breaking the relationship; tend to create destructive responses that exacerbate the conflict and/or damage the relationship (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 2016).

7. IMPLICATIONS

The results imply that human resource managers may adopt certain measures to reduce social distance and enhance relationships between employees in organizations. Strong human resource management practices can lead to increase productivity and profit and boost living standards, and ultimately employees will get the greatest possible satisfaction by reducing social distance. Therefore, organizations should promote the adoption of necessary strategies that ensure the rightful role of social relationships, such as inclusion and engagement amongst the main players in the organisation.

From the employees' point of view, it is important to raise awareness among them to encourage skills development in managing social conflict that arises between them in daily activities. At the management policy level, this can be achieved by raising the training budget for employees'

developing inter-personal skills. Moreover, improving inter-personal relationship skills, i.e. communication skills amongst the managers and employees by giving them periodical training, attending seminars on the topics should be strategically set at the policy level and implemented in the right way.

Finally, the results suggest that cultural and psychological homogeneity among work groups is an advantage that neutralize relationship conflicts and enhance job satisfaction which eventually can positively impacts organizational effectiveness and performance. Therefore, organizations must not underestimate the difficulties created by social distance in workplaces and need to put sound policies to properly manage and support social relationships. This also signifies the importance of selecting people who emphasize empathy, good communication skills, and tolerance of others as a way of reducing harmful conflicts in the work place.

8. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are four main limitations must be taken into consideration before generalizing the results of this study. First, the study sample was selected from a single sector in Saudi Arabia. Other sectors in other cultures may generate different results. Therefore, future studies may broaden our study by analyzing other sectors in other cultures to determine whether there are differences in results across industries, sectors, or cultures. Secondly, only relationship between coworkers was analyzed, other relationships, such as between employees and their supervisors may broaden the scope of studying social distance. Thirdly, our study analyzed direct relationship between social distance and relationship conflict and job satisfaction. Future studies could extend our research by introducing more moderating variables, such as leadership style and task characteristics. Finally, the study is cross-sectional in its design which does not allow us to establish direct causal relationships between study variables. Future studies are suggested to use longitudinal methods to clarify the relationships between study variables.

9. CONCLUSION

Although many studies tried to investigate the effects of social distance on behavior of employees in organizations, still some confusion exists about its effect on relationship conflict and job satisfaction. Previous studies show conflicting results about such effect. Moreover, there is a lack of studies about the topic in the context of Saudi Arabia and developing world in general.

In this study we tried to explore the relationships between social distance, relationship conflict, and job satisfaction in the context of Saudi education sector. Our results supported previous studies that affirm that high social distance detrimental to organizations and negatively affect performance by increasing relationship conflict and reducing job satisfaction of employees. These results highlight the importance of improving relationships between employees in the work setting and reducing any conflict that negatively affect healthy and friendly environment in the workplace. This can help in redefining the roles that can be played by managers and supervisors in today's organizations. To sum up, this research is one step towards more promising studies in this interesting area of study.

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