

# Defining a Grievance: A Theoretical Examination of An Old Issue

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## Abstract

This conceptual study attempted to fill a gap in the theoretical knowledge about employee grievances in terms of having a synthesized description and explanation of defining a grievance, and furthermore to solve an intellectual puzzle to uncover whether the term *Grievance* has been defined in the existent literature in the way that is more appropriate to today's business context. Six research questions were formulated and they were answered systematically by following a desk research strategy. 25 definitions from the literature were examined, 11 common characteristics were identified and listed, and based on the derived characteristics, a content analysis was done. The study yielded several findings consistent with the formulated six research questions and they are: there is no generally accepted definition for the term grievance; it is possible to identify and list 11 common characteristics which derive from or which are included in the definitions considered for the study; different classifications of grievances exist in the existent literature such as informal and formal, valid and invalid, expressed and unexpressed, and individual and collective; it is possible to classify existent definitions as narrow and broad, and except the five definitions all other definitions (20) examined were narrow; only expressed dissatisfactions need to be dealt with in managing employee grievances because of several valid reasons; and finally it is appropriate for an organization to consider generally work-related grievances for the organizational effort in solving grievances, and consider non-work related grievances as a voluntary method of grievance handling through employee counseling.

**Key Words:** Definition, Grievance, Grievance Handling

## Introduction

The term *Grievance* is a very popular term in managing people at work in an organization. Although it is possible to find employee grievances and employer grievances, this paper focuses on only employee grievances. In their working lives, employees occasionally have cause to be uncomfortable, disappointed or aggrieved either about certain managerial decisions, practices or service conditions (Monappa, 1995). Management of human resources is an important and challenging function for every organization (Jinadasa and Opatha, 1999) being a vital field of studies and a well recognized practice of high value (Arulrajah and Opatha, 2016). Even in organizations where best Human Resource Management (HRM) practices are being practiced, there is a possibility that an employee or several employees is/are subject to suffering from a grievance or grievances during the employment life. In organizations where HRM is mal, most of the employees suffer from grievances, not occasionally, but frequently.

“What is a grievance” or “defining a grievance” is an old issue in HRM and Industrial Relations (IR) literature. This issue has been dealt with in almost all the recognized textbooks on HRM and IR. Not many but few research articles too dealt with this old issue. The author of this research paper too had dealt with this issue in his several published articles which need to be revisited. It reveals a gap in the theoretical knowledge about

employee grievances in terms of having a synthesized description and explanation of defining a grievance. In addition, an intellectual puzzle exists to uncover whether the term *Grievance* has been defined in the existent literature in the way that is more appropriate to today's business context.

### **Research Questions and Objective**

Following research questions were formulated so that a systematic attempt could be made to find answers:

1. Is there a generally accepted definition for the term *Grievance*?
2. Is it possible to identify and list common characteristics which derive from the definitions studied?
3. Are there different classifications of grievances in the existent literature?
4. Is it possible to classify existent definitions of grievance as narrow and broad?
5. Should only expressed dissatisfactions be dealt with under the management of employee grievances or not?
6. Should both work-related grievances and non-work related grievances be considered for the organizational effort in solving grievances?

The objective of this research paper is to find answers systematically for the above mentioned six research questions.

### **Method**

This research paper is predominantly a conceptual study which gives some theoretical contributions. In order to answer all the six research questions systematically, a comprehensive focused literature survey was done by using the desk research strategy. First textbooks on HRM and IR published by relevant authorities were utilized to find definitions of the term *Grievance*. Almost all the textbooks which were available to the researcher were used. Then some relevant research papers available to the researcher were used to find out definitions further. A systematic examination was carried out into the found definitions of the term *Grievance* for the purpose of identifying and listing common characteristics. Based on the derived characteristics, the contents of all the found definitions of the term *Grievance* were analyzed and it revealed certain findings as the results of the content analysis. Furthermore, the researcher's own arguments and inferences based on the existent literature were utilized wherever necessary to find reasonable answers for the research questions.

### **Definitions of the Term *Grievance***

In fact the term *Grievance* is a subjective concept and therefore it is possible to observe that different authors define it in different ways.

A grievance is a formal dispute between an employee and management on the conditions of employment (Glueck, 1979). According to him, grievances arise because of differing

interpretations of the contract by employees, stewards, and management, a violation of a contract provision, violation of law, a violation of work procedures or other precedents, and perceived unfair treatment of an employee by management. Thus, according to Glueck (1979), grievances are formal disputes which occur between employees and management with regard to employment conditions.

A grievance is a formal complaint by an employee (the “grievant”) regarding any event, action, or practice which he or she believes violates the collective agreement and it may arise from the dismissal or promotion of an employee, from the reassignment of an employee from one job to another, from the addition of duties, from the assignment of overtime to or the laying off of particular employees, from practices to health and safety, and so on (Stone and Meltz, 1983). According to them, a formal complaint is made by an employee owing to any violation of the collective agreement and that is referred to as a grievance.

A grievance is any dissatisfaction or feeling of injustice in connection with one’s employment situation that is brought to the attention of management (Beach, 1985). According to this definition, a grievance is a dissatisfaction or a feeling of injustice felt by an employee in relation to his or her employment. Furthermore, that dissatisfaction needs to be brought to the attention of management.

‘Grievance’ implies dissatisfaction, or distress, or suffering or grief caused unnecessarily or illegally (Ahuja, 1988). Further he defines that grievance is real or imaginary feeling of personal injustice which an employee has concerning his employment; and in labour-management relations it is a complaint made in writing with regard to a company related matter arising from employment or service conditions, or from conditions involving unfair treatment by the employers, or from violation of any agreement or standing instructions. Thus a grievance is a dissatisfaction in an employee relations context, a complaint in a labour relation context, and related to employment conditions.

Salipante and Bouwen (1990) define that a grievance is a complaint-whether valid or not-about an organizational policy, procedure, or managerial practice that creates dissatisfaction or discomfort. This definition does not specify a union setting.

According to Mohamed (1992) there are three associated terms i.e. complaint, grievance, and dispute. Complaint is a dissatisfaction which the employee brings to the attention of his immediate superior; grievance is a formal complaint by the employee concerned which he brings to the attention of his immediate superior or in accordance with the grievance procedure outlined in the collective agreement between the company and the union; and dispute is an unresolved grievance which involves the company and the union and is referred to the Ministry of Human Resources for conciliation or arbitration (Mohamed, 1992). Here the relevant country is Malaysia and a dispute is referred to the country’s Ministry of Human Resources. Before the dispute, a grievance occurs and it is formal and written. According to him, a verbal grievance is labeled as a complaint.

A grievance is defined as any discontent or dissatisfaction arising from a feeling or a belief of injustice felt by an employee or a group of employees in connection with the work environment (Opatha, 1994). When the management of an organization does an injustice to a certain employee, i.e. not giving a promotion to the due employee, not giving the pay agreed upon, transferring an employee to a job which does not suit his or her qualifications, experiences and preferences, it is natural that the employee has a dissatisfaction owing to a feeling or a belief of the injustice.

Monappa (1995, p. 149) writes:

*“A grievance may be submitted by a worker, or several workers, in respect of any measure or situation which directly affects, or is likely to affect, the conditions of employment of one or several workers in the organization. Where a grievance is transformed into a general claim—either by the union or by a large number of workers—it falls outside the grievance procedure and normally comes under the purview of collective bargaining.”*

According to Monappa (1995), a grievance can be submitted with regard to any cause or something that affects the conditions of employment, and a grievance has a narrower perspective; and it is concerned with the interpretation of a contract or award as applied to an individual or a few employees.

A grievance means any discontentment or dissatisfaction arising out of anything related to the enterprise where he is working (Singh, Chhabra, and Taneja, 1995). Here ‘he’ means the employee and according to the authors, grievance may not be expressed and even may not be valid. Their definition is very broad covering all kinds of dissatisfaction felt by an employee in connection with his or her employment.

According to Mamoria (1996) a dissatisfaction which is orally made known by one employee to another is known as a complaint; and a complaint becomes a grievance when this dissatisfaction, which is mostly related to work, is brought to the notice of the management.

Rollinson, Hook, Foot, and Handley (1996) studied about supervisor and manager styles in handling discipline and grievance and considered only individual issues of dissatisfaction as grievances with making no distinction between complaints and grievances. They cited defining made by Thomson and Murray in 1976, i.e. disputes as issues about which employees collectively propose a significant change to the status quo; they are normally initiated and pursued at high level by a trade union; and grievances, more often commence by the expression of dissatisfaction to a supervisor or manager by a single employee. However, they considered only individual issues for their study.

An employee who believes that his or her rights under the contract agreed during the collective bargaining have been violated may file a grievance; and virtually all contracts provide a grievance procedure for resolving disagreements about contract administration

(Fisher, Schoenfeldt, and Shaw, 1999). According to these three authors, grievances occur when the meaning of the contract is in dispute.

Pettinger (1999) defines that a grievance is deemed to have arisen once the employee makes a formalized complaint and it may be made by an individual, or a group directly affected, or through a representative, for example, a spokesperson or trade union representative. It seems that an informal grievance is a complaint which is verbal while a formal grievance is a complaint which is written.

Dessler (2000) defines a grievance as any factor involving wages, hours, or conditions of employment that is used as a complaint against the employer. Thus, according to Dessler (2000), a grievance is a complaint made by an employee against his or her employer with regard to employment conditions. Here grievances were discussed under contract administration (collective bargaining agreement).

Trudeau (2000) gave a detailed analysis with respect of the internal grievances process and grievance arbitration in Quebec and he used the definition of grievance given by the Labour Code of Quebec in Canada and it was any disagreement respecting the interpretation or application of a collective agreement. Here the term *grievance* relates to a disagreement that occurs in a unionized organization.

According to Kleiman (2005), grievance is an allegation that employer or employee contract rights have been violated. Furthermore, contract disputes are resolved through a grievance system which is a system that provides due process for claims of collective bargaining agreement violations (Kleiman, 2005). Kleiman's definition focuses on alleged violations of collective bargaining agreement and grievances can be filed by either employees or employer.

In a study on grievance management and its links to workplace justice, Nurse and Devonish (2007, p. 90) write under background to the study:

*“One of the important provisions of collective agreements is the grievance procedure. It has historically been regarded as both an institutional mechanism and a process for managing workplace conflict arising out of the contract between employer and employee. The use of grievance procedures has become institutionalized in union-management relations. Such usage admits of the inevitability of conflict that emanates from the contradictory relationship between workers and employers. Grievance procedures, however, are intended to provide “peaceful” means for resolving that conflict.”*

Nurse and Devonish did not define the term *Grievance* directly in their research paper. However, it indicates that grievance is a workplace conflict that arises out of the contract between employer and employee; and a grievance procedure is an institution mechanism in union-management relations.

A grievance gets filed by an employee who believes that the labour agreement has been violated (Aswathappa, 2008). According to him, a grievance is generally restricted to violations of the terms and conditions of employment.

According to Cascio (2010), grievance is an alleged violation of the rights of workers on the job. The author meant that workers are usually non-managerial employees who were members of trade unions and a grievance arises when any right of workers on the job is violated by the management. Grievances occur when disputes arise about the interpretation of the collective bargaining agreement, potential violations of federal or state law, violations of past practices or company rules, or violations of management's responsibility (e.g., to provide safe and healthy working conditions). Cascio's definition focuses on alleged violations of workers' rights at work and in unionized firms, grievances can be seen.

A grievance is a complaint, whether valid or not, about an organizational policy, procedure, or managerial practice that creates dissatisfaction or discomforts; and this complaint may be made by an individual or by the union (Ivancevich, 2010). According to him, grievance procedures are usually followed in unionized companies, but they are in non-unionized organizations too as important channels of communication.

Mathis and Jackson (2011) present two terms, i.e. complaint and grievance in the context of grievance management. According to them, a complaint is merely an indication of employee dissatisfaction while a grievance is a complaint formally stated in writing. Thus, a complaint is a verbal one but a grievance is a written one. Further they write that management should be concerned with both complaints and grievances, because both indicate potential problems within the workforce.

Torrington, Hall, Taylor, and Atkinson (2011) define a grievance as a complaint that has been formally presented to an appropriate management representative or to a union official. Furthermore, they present two concepts, i.e. dissatisfaction and complaint which are different from the term *grievance*. Dissatisfaction is anything that disturbs an employee, whether or not the unrest is expressed in words; and complaint is a spoken or written dissatisfaction brought to the attention of a manager or other responsible person (Torrington, et al, 2011). Thus, according to them, a grievance is a formal complaint presented by the grieved employee to a right manager or a union representative.

According to Jackson, Schuler, and Werner (2012), a grievance is a charge that the union-management contract has been violated and it may be filed by the union for employees or by employers, although management rarely does so. Thus, a grievance occurs when the union-management contract gets violated and it is usually made by the union on behalf of the employee who is grieved.

A grievance is a formal complaint concerning pay, working conditions, or violation of some other factor in a collective bargaining agreement (Lussier and Hendon, 2013). According to

them, a grievance relates to a context where employees have been organized as a trade union. In union settings grievance procedures help protect employees against arbitrary decisions by management with regard to discipline, discharge, promotions, or benefits in addition to establishing a formal process for enforcing the provisions of their contracts (Lussier and Hendon, 2013).

A grievance is a complaint filed by an employee who perceives that he or she has been unfairly treated by an organization (Stewart and Brown, 2014). Further they define grievance as a dispute that arises between an employer and employee over the terms of the employment agreement; and when a union represents workers, grievance procedures are clearly stated in the formal contract that is a negotiated and accepted collective agreement. Exhibit 1 presents various definitions given above by various scholars with regard to the term.

**Exhibit: 1 Definitions of the Term *Grievance***

| Number | Definition   | Author/Authors             | Year |
|--------|--|----------------------------|------|
| 1      | A formal dispute between an employee and management on the conditions of employment  | Glueck                     | 1979 |
| 2      | A formal complaint by an employee (the “grievant”) regarding any event, action, or practice which he or she believes violates the collective agreement   | Stone and Meltz            | 1983 |
| 3      | Any dissatisfaction or feeling of injustice in connection with one’s employment situation that is brought to the attention of management   | Beach                      | 1985 |
| 4      | ‘Grievance’ implies dissatisfaction, or distress, or suffering or grief caused unnecessarily or illegally  | Ahuja                      | 1988 |
| 5      | A complaint-whether valid or not-about an organizational policy, procedure, or managerial practice that creates dissatisfaction or discomfort  | Salipante and Bouwen       | 1990 |
| 6      | A formal complaint by the employee concerned which he brings to the attention of his immediate superior or in accordance with the grievance procedure outlined in the collective agreement between the company and the union | Mohamed                    | 1992 |
| 7      | Any discontent or dissatisfaction arising from a feeling or a belief of injustice felt by an employee or a group of employees in connection with the work environment  | Opatha                     | 1994 |
| 8      | A complaint submitted with regard to any cause or something that affects the conditions of employment, and concerned with the interpretation of a contract or award as applied to an individual or a few employees.          | Monappa                    | 1995 |
| 9      | Any discontentment or dissatisfaction arising out of anything related to the enterprise where he is working  | Singh, Chhabra, and Taneja | 1995 |

|    |  |  |      |
|----|--|--|------|
| 10 | A dissatisfaction, which is mostly related to work, is brought to the notice of the management   | Mamoria                                | 1996 |
| 11 | An individual issue of dissatisfaction   | Rollinson, Hook, Foot, and Handley     | 1996 |
| 12 | A complaint filed by an employee who believes that his or her rights under the contract agreed during the collective bargaining have been violated   | Fisher, Schoenfeldt, and Shaw          | 1999 |
| 13 | A grievance is deemed to have arisen once the employee makes a formalized complaint and it may be made by an individual, or a group directly affected, or through a representative, for example, a spokesperson or trade union representative. | Pettinger                              | 1999 |
| 14 | Any factor involving wages, hours, or conditions of employment that is used as a complaint against the employer  | Dessler                                | 2000 |
| 15 | Any disagreement respecting the interpretation or application of a collective agreement  | Trudeau                                | 2000 |
| 16 | An allegation that employer or employee contract rights have been violated   | Kleiman                                | 2005 |
| 17 | A workplace conflict that arises out of the contract between employer and employee   | Nurse and Devonish                     | 2007 |
| 18 | A grievance gets filed by an employee who believes that the labour agreement has been violated.  | Aswathappa                             | 2008 |
| 19 | An alleged violation of the rights of workers on the job   | Cascio                                 | 2010 |
| 20 | A complaint, whether valid or not, about an organizational policy, procedure, or managerial practice that creates dissatisfaction or discomforts; and this complaint may be made by an individual or by the union                              | Ivancevich                             | 2010 |
| 21 | A complaint formally stated in writing   | Mathis and Jackson                     | 2011 |
| 22 | A complaint that has been formally presented to an appropriate management representative or to a union official  | Torrington, Hall, Taylor, and Atkinson | 2011 |
| 23 | A charge that the union-management contract has been violated and filed by the union for employees   | Jackson, Schuler, and Werner           | 2012 |
| 24 | A formal complaint concerning pay, working conditions, or violation of some other factor in a collective bargaining agreement  | Lussier and Hendon                     | 2013 |
| 25 | A complaint filed by an employee who perceives that he or she has been unfairly treated by an organization   | Stewart and Brown                      | 2014 |

A careful examination of the above mentioned definitions does reveal that there are different definitions given by different authors. The word *grievance* has been variously defined by different authorities (Mamoria, 1996). Indeed, in case of an abstract concept like grievance the availability of different definitions given by different authors is not a surprise and it is a usual expected conclusion. Hence there is no generally accepted definition for the term *Grievance*.

### **Derived or Included Characteristics**

It was possible to make a systematic attempt to identify some common characteristics which derive from or which are included in the definitions considered under this study. In this study 25 definitions of the term *Grievance* were considered and examined. Here 'common characteristic' refers to a feature that can be derived from or has been included in at least two or more definitions. An attempt was made to examine the definitions for identifying common characteristics and following characteristics can be listed:

1. Dissatisfaction
2. Complaint
3. Dispute
4. Informality (verbal one)
5. Formality (written one)
6. Arising out of something relating to employment
7. Individual nature (made individually)
8. Collective nature (made collectively)
9. Union involvement (made by the trade union)
10. Organized labour context (Its occurrence is in a context where employees have been organized into unions)
11. Real or imaginary matter

Thus, 11 characteristics were identified as common characteristics and they were considered for a subsequent analysis which follows.

### **Content Analysis of the Common Characteristics**

In addition to the 11 common characteristics found from or in the definitions numbering 25 another characteristic was considered and it was 'Non-work life reason (It can be in relation to employee's personal life too)'. It was numbered as item 12. Item numbered 12, i.e. non-work life reason was indeed not an item derived from or included in the above mentioned definitions. It was taken for the analysis for the purpose of finding a rational answer for a subsequent research question of this study. Based on the above characteristics the contents of all the 25 definitions of the term *Grievance* were examined and the results of the content analysis are shown in Table 1.

**Table: 1 Characteristics in the Definitions**

| Author/s                                   | Characteristics |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|--|-----------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
|  | 1               | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  | 8  | 9  | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| 1. Glueck                                  |                 |    | x  |    | x  | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 2. Stone and Meltz                         |                 | x  |    |    | x  |    | x  |    |    | x  |    |    |
| 3. Beach                                   | x               |    |    | x  | x  | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 4. Ahuja                                   | x               |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 5. Salipante and Bouwen                    | x               | x  |    |    |    | x  |    |    |    |    | x  |    |
| 6. Mohamed                                 |                 | x  |    |    | x  |    | x  |    |    | x  |    |    |
| 7. Opatha                                  | x               |    |    | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  |    |    | x  |    |
| 8. Monappa                                 |                 | x  |    |    |    | x  | x  | x  |    |    |    |    |
| 9. Singh, Chhabra, and Taneja              | x               |    |    | x  | x  | x  |    |    |    |    | x  |    |
| 10. Mamoria                                | x               |    |    |    |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 11. Rollinson, Hook, Foot, and Handley     | x               |    |    |    |    |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |
| 12. Fisher, Schoenfeldt, and Shaw          |                 | x  |    |    | x  |    | x  |    |    | x  |    |    |
| 13. Pettinger                              |                 | x  |    |    | x  |    | x  | x  | x  | x  |    |    |
| 14. Dessler                                |                 | x  |    |    |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 15. Trudeau                                |                 |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    | x  |    |    |
| 16. Kleiman                                |                 | x  |    |    |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 17. Nurse and Devonish                     |                 |    | x  |    |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 18. Aswathappa                             |                 |    |    |    | x  |    | x  |    |    | x  |    |    |
| 19. Cascio                                 |                 | x  |    |    |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 20. Ivancevich                             | x               | x  |    |    |    | x  | x  |    | x  |    | x  |    |
| 21. Mathis and Jackson                     |                 | x  |    |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 22. Torrington, Hall, Taylor, and Atkinson |                 | x  |    |    | x  |    | x  |    |    | x  |    |    |
| 23. Jackson, Schuler, and Werner           |                 | x  |    |    | x  |    |    |    | x  | x  |    |    |
| 24. Lussier and Hendon                     |                 | x  |    |    | x  | x  |    |    |    | x  |    |    |
| 25. Stewart and Brown                      |                 | x  |    |    | x  |    | x  |    |    |    |    |    |
| Total                                      | 08              | 15 | 03 | 03 | 14 | 13 | 11 | 03 | 03 | 09 | 04 | 0  |

According to the results of content analysis of the definitions numbering 25, out of 11 characteristics the item that has the highest intensity of consideration (number of counts in the definitions) is the item numbered 2, i.e. complaint. The next highest item is the item numbered 5, i.e. formality. The third one and the fourth one in terms of the intensity of consideration are the item numbered 6, i.e. arising out of something relating to employment and the item numbered 7, i.e. individual nature (made individually). Another finding of this content analysis is that there is no single item that had been considered in each definition. Thus, it was reconfirmed that there is no generally accepted definition for the term *Grievance*.

### **Different Classifications of Grievances and Broad and Narrow Definitions**

There can be different types of employee grievances and the relevant literature does reveal so. Singh et al (1995) point out that grievances may be broad or narrow and a broad definition includes different types of grievances such as expressed or not, and valid or not. Grievances are manifested in several ways such as gossiping, active criticism, argumentation, increased labour turnover, carelessness in the use of tools, materials, and poor workmanship, etc; and also are implied by indifference to work, day dreaming, absenteeism, tardiness etc (Singh et al, 1995). According to Singh et al (1995) a grievance may be valid one which means that it is rational and a genuine one that needs to be removed by the management whereas a grievance may be invalid or imaginary which means that it is irrational or emotional based on sentiments, distorted perception, lack of thinking etc. Grievances are feelings, sometimes real, sometimes imagined, which an employee may have in regard to his employment situation (Mamoria, 1996). Rollinson et al (1996) consider a broad definition as a definition that is concerned with any measure or situation which appears contrary to the provisions of an applicable collective agreement or a contract of employment, to work rules, or laws or regulations, or to the custom or usage of the occupation.

Grievance may be real based on actual injustice or imagined based on assumed injustice, which has not occurred from the perception of management; it may be expressed distinctly or not; it may be informal (verbal) or formal (written); and it may be individual or collective: An employee or a group of employees feels/feel or believes/believe that an injustice has been done by a manager or several managers in the organization (Opatha and Ismail, 2001; Opatha, 2009). Grievances have been classified as formal (written) and informal (verbal) ones (Mathis and Jackson, 2005). In 2009 Opatha (p. 816) concludes by basing on the classifications given by Mohamed (1990); Pettinger (1999); and Mathis and Jackson (2011):

*“If a complaint goes unresolved, it becomes a grievance, and if a grievance goes unresolved it becomes a dispute. A complaint involves the grievant and his/her immediate superior while a grievance may involve the grievant, immediate superior, immediate superior’s superior and/or human resource manager. A dispute involves the firm (General Manager and Human Resource Manager) and the union.”*

Informally the employee who has a problem presents it to his or her immediate superior. An informal grievance is a complaint in verbal while a formal grievance is a complaint in writing.

Can the definitions under this study be classified as narrow and broad? Then how many definitions as broad? It is important to emphasize that classifying the definitions as narrow and broad does not undermine the value of each definition considered for the study. Relevant authors must have given the definitions to suit their contexts of writing and may have given them by following the prevailing practice. Exhibit 2 presents the classification of the definitions as narrow and broad.

**Exhibit: 2 Classification of the Definitions as Narrow or Broad with Reasons**

| No. | Definition   | Author/s             | Narrow or Broad | Reason/s  |
|-----|--|----------------------|-----------------|---|
| 1   | A formal dispute between an employee and management on the conditions of employment  | Glueck               | Narrow          | Only formal dispute   |
| 2   | A formal complaint by an employee (the “grievant”) regarding any event, action, or practice which he or she believes violates the collective agreement   | Stone and Meltz      | Narrow          | Only formal complaint and only violations of collective agreement |
| 3   | Any dissatisfaction or feeling of injustice in connection with one’s employment situation that is brought to the attention of management   | Beach                | Broad           | Any dissatisfaction can include any type of grievances            |
| 4   | ‘Grievance’ implies dissatisfaction, or distress, or suffering or grief caused unnecessarily or illegally  | Ahuja                | Broad           | Any type of grievances can be included                            |
| 5   | A complaint-whether valid or not-about an organizational policy, procedure, or managerial practice that creates dissatisfaction or discomfort  | Salipante and Bouwen | Narrow          | Informal and unexpressed types have been excluded                 |
| 6   | A formal complaint by the employee concerned which he brings to the attention of his immediate superior or in accordance with the grievance procedure outlined in the collective agreement between the company and the union | Mohamed              | Narrow          | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded       |
| 7   | Any discontent or dissatisfaction arising from a feeling or a belief of injustice felt by an employee or a group of employees in connection  | Opatha               | Broad           | Any type of grievances can be included                            |

|    |  |                                    |        |   |
|----|--|------------------------------------|--------|---|
|    | with the work environment  |                                    |        |   |
| 8  | A complaint submitted with regard to any cause or something that affects the conditions of employment, and concerned with the interpretation of a contract or award as applied to an individual or a few employees.                            | Monappa                            | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded   |
| 9  | Any discontentment or dissatisfaction arising out of anything related to the enterprise where he is working  | Singh, Chhabra, and Taneja         | Broad  | Any type of grievances can be included  |
| 10 | A dissatisfaction, which is mostly related to work, is brought to the notice of the management   | Mamoria                            | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded   |
| 11 | An individual issue of dissatisfaction   | Rollinson, Hook, Foot, and Handley | Broad  | Any type of grievances can be included  |
| 12 | A complaint filed by an employee who believes that his or her rights under the contract agreed during the collective bargaining have been violated   | Fisher, Schoenfeldt, and Shaw      | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded. Also only violations of collective agreement |
| 13 | A grievance is deemed to have arisen once the employee makes a formalized complaint and it may be made by an individual, or a group directly affected, or through a representative, for example, a spokesperson or trade union representative. | Pettinger                          | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded   |
| 14 | Any factor involving wages, hours, or conditions of employment that is used as a complaint against the employer  | Dessler                            | Narrow | Unexpressed and invalid types have been excluded.   |
| 15 | Any disagreement respecting the interpretation or application of a collective agreement  | Trudeau                            | Narrow | Only violations of collective agreement   |
| 16 | An allegation that employer or employee contract rights have been violated   | Kleiman                            | Narrow | Only violations of employee contract  |
| 17 | A workplace conflict that arises out of  | Nurse and                          | Narrow | Only violations of  |

|    |   |  |        |   |
|----|---|--|--------|---|
|    | the contract between employer and employee  | Devonish                               |        | employment contract   |
| 18 | A grievance gets filed by an employee who believes that the labour agreement has been violated.   | Aswathappa                             | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded. Also only violations of collective agreement |
| 19 | An alleged violation of the rights of workers on the job  | Cascio                                 | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded   |
| 20 | A complaint, whether valid or not, about an organizational policy, procedure, or managerial practice that creates dissatisfaction or discomforts; and this complaint may be made by an individual or by the union | Ivancevich                             | Narrow | Unexpressed type has been excluded  |
| 21 | A complaint formally stated in writing  | Mathis and Jackson                     | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded   |
| 22 | A complaint that has been formally presented to an appropriate management representative or to a union official   | Torrington, Hall, Taylor, and Atkinson | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded   |
| 23 | A charge that the union-management contract has been violated and filed by the union for employees  | Jackson, Schuler, and Werner           | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded. Also only violations of collective agreement |
| 24 | A formal complaint concerning pay, working conditions, or violation of some other factor in a collective bargaining agreement   | Lussier and Hendon                     | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded.  |
| 25 | A complaint filed by an employee who perceives that he or she has been unfairly treated by an organization  | Stewart and Brown                      | Narrow | Informal, unexpressed, and invalid types have been excluded   |

Thus, only five definitions can be classified as broad and others are not. There is a serious danger of giving a very narrow definition of a grievance as adopted in many unionized companies; and if only genuine violations of the union-management agreement are attempted to solve it is akin to a housewife's sweeping the dirt under the rug and pretending it does not exist (Beach, 1985). In addition to genuine violations of the terms and conditions of the union-management agreement, there may be other violations such as personnel policies, procedures, rules, and traditions by managers and consequently employees will have feelings of injustice resulting in creating dissatisfactions. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, there are a considerable number of organizations which are not unionized and those organizations do not have collective agreements.

An attempt was made to develop a new working definition (nominal definition that is assigned to a term; that is the specific definition given by the researcher to achieve his/her research objectives) (Babbie, 1986; Opatha, 2003). The developed working definition which is broad is as follows:

*Any discontent or dissatisfaction arising from a feeling or a belief of injustice done by management of the organization felt by an employee or a group of employees in connection with the work environment*

Mention of 'any' in the definition can include valid, invalid, formal, informal, expressed, unexpressed, individual and collective grievances. Mention of 'work environment' can include all the aspects of working which relate to the grieved employee/s including employment contract, terms and conditions of collective agreement (in case of unionized setting), and interactions with peers, customers (both internal and external), subordinates (in case of a manager), and superiors. Mention of 'management' can include a manager, several managers, all managers, or the employer.

### **Only Expressed Grievances?**

One can argue that it is good for the organization to consider only expressed grievances for grievance settlement. One valid reason for this argument is that managers are usually busy and they are supposed to be creative and innovative to face various challenges in the contemporary competitive business setting, and therefore they will not be in a good position to uncover implied or unexpressed grievances which are being suffered by their subordinates. Another valid reason is that the manager may not have the ability to understand subordinates' needs and interests always or often.

Beach (1985, p. 443) recommends:

*"It is difficult for management to act on an employee's problem if he or she does not call the matter to their attention. The emphasis on management's part should be to create a proper leadership climate, so that employees who feel they have a justifiable complaint feel free to inform management of this fact."*

Guasco and Robinson (2007, p. 68) write: *“We all feel that people with whom we are in relationships, personal or business, should know us well enough to understand our needs without our having to express them. But people are not terribly good at reading minds. The only way for people to learn about each other’s needs and interests is to invite that information in some manner through communication.”*

The above quotations taken from the authorities tend to suggest that employees need to be encouraged to express or present their grievances to their superiors or at least to HR department of the organization. It is more likely that an employee, who does not communicate with others who need to get relevant information, encounters conflict (Opatha, 2010). Here the need of a climate that encourages the grievant to express their dissatisfactions is emphasized. In a discouraging climate it is possible to happen that the grieved ones do not openly express their sufferings. Formal grievances are rare since few employees will question their superior’s judgment (whatever their private opinion) and fewer still will risk being stigmatized as a troublemaker, and furthermore many people do not initiate formal grievances because they believe that nothing will be done as a result of their attempt (Torrington and Hall, 1987).

Singh et al (1995, p. 353) stress:

*“It is not wise to recognize only expressed grievances and overlook the unexpressed ones. In fact, unexpressed or implied grievances are more dangerous than the grievances which are stated because it is not known when the implied grievances may explode. It requires a high order of skill for an executive to identify such grievances.”*

Hidden dissatisfaction grows and soon arouses an emotional state that may be completely out of proportion to the original complaint (Mathis and Jackson, 2000). Hence, it is good for smooth running of grievance management to make a requirement by the management (top) that applies to all employees of the organization, and this requirement is to express all grievances to the relevant managers.

However, relevant managers need to be trained to identify unexpressed grievances and employees can be communicated properly about the difficulty of settling unexpressed grievances and therefore they can be encouraged to present their grievances formally or informally. A good practice of grievance management first requires the grievant to present his or her grievance informally to his or her immediate superior, and then formally (presenting the grievance in writing if a reasonable settlement cannot be made by the immediate superior) (Opatha, 2009).

### **Non-Work Related Grievances?**

It is possible to observe that employees may suffer from grievances whose causes are relating to their non-work lives (personal life, family life, social life etc.). Grievances which arise from non-work lives can be labeled as non-work related grievances. Should non-work related grievances be considered for the organizational effort in solving grievances?

Importance of this question becomes more when dual-career couples, women at work, married mothers at work, and workaholic males are considered.

Singh et al (1995, p. 353) stress:

*“The discontent arises out of something connected with the organization. The sources of grievances lie within the company such as unfair treatment by the supervisor, violation of company rules, etc. Personal reasons such as illness in the family, conflict with a neighbour, etc. do not constitute a grievance. Such outside sources are beyond the control of the employer.”*

Many authors argue not to consider employee grievances which occur owing to personal reasons as they are out of control by the management of the organization. According to the results of content analysis of the 25 definitions, ‘Non-work life reason (It can be in relation to employee’s personal life too)’ which was the item numbered 12 was found to be included in none of the definitions. It reveals that all the 25 definitions of the term *Grievance* considered under this study do not have such a characteristic (non-work life reason) implying that non-work related grievances need not to be considered under the efforts done by the organizations in solving employee grievances.

HRM attempts to achieve and enhance employee motivation, employee commitment, employee job involvement, organizational citizenship behaviour, employee job satisfaction, employee productivity, employee development, quality of work life, employee happiness, and finally organizational success; and without solving problems being suffered by employees of the organization, it is impossible or hard to achieve the above (Opatha, 2019). According to Werther, Davis, Shwind, Das, and Miner (1985), personal problems such as marital problems, psychological problems, alcohol habit, overweight, smoking habit and drug habit have caused employees to miss work (in the order of importance). For a study done by Akuratiyage and Opatha (2004) with regard to grievances of branch managers in commercial banks in Sri Lanka the conceptual definition used was “any discontent arising from a feeling or a belief of injustice felt by a commercial bank branch manager in connection to the work environment or personal life.” Grievances whose causes were related to personal life were too considered in the study. Opatha (2019, p. 205) writes:

*“In a country like Sri Lanka fulfilling obligations toward spouse, children, and parents is a highly valued cultural norm. When an employee is not in a position of fulfilling so called obligations, he or she will have a lot of personal problems. Also when the relevant parties do not perform their roles properly, the employee gets personal problems. ....Owing to personal problems the employee has a **personal pain**. This personal pain may become **work pain** at the employee work setting. Then, this work pain can become **organizational pain** (affecting negatively job performance of the particular employee, job performance of others, and overall organizational performance). Personal pain may lead to work pain which may lead to organizational pain. These effects together are called the **Domino Effect**.”*

The domino effect is the theory that tells that one event can lead to a range of subsequent events; and personal problems can have a domino effect as difficulties experienced by

troubled employees eventually have a negative impact on the organization (Catt and Miller, 1991). As personal problems can affect job performance, a strategy called employee counselling is of importance. Counselling is a major method of handling employee grievance and it is appropriate for solving grievances which arise from non-work life reasons. Generally it is appropriate for an organization not to consider non-work related grievances for the organizational effort in solving grievances. Hence, work-related grievances are of course considered under management of employee grievances in an organization and these grievances are essentially to be settled. It is appropriate for the organization to do employee counselling through the help of HR department for employees who want to get organizational helps to solve their personal problems. Counselling is not mandatory and it is up to the grievant to seek the service.

### Conclusion

This non-traditional research paper was written to fill a gap in the theoretical knowledge about employee grievances in terms of having a synthesized description and explanation of defining a grievance, in addition, to solve an intellectual puzzle to uncover whether the term *Grievance* has been defined in the existent literature in the way that is more appropriate to today's business context. Six research questions were formulated to be answered systematically. The findings of the study reveal that there is no generally accepted definition for the term grievance; it is possible to identify and list 11 common characteristics which derive from the definitions under the study; there are different classifications of grievances in the existent literature such as informal and formal, valid and invalid, expressed and unexpressed, and individual and collective; it is possible to classify existent definitions as narrow and broad, and except five definitions all other definitions (20) were narrow; only expressed dissatisfactions should be dealt with under the management of employee grievances owing to several valid reasons; and finally work-related grievances are generally considered for the organizational effort in solving grievances, and non-work related grievances can be considered for an organization as a voluntary method of grievance handling through employee counseling.

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