

# Investigating the validity of Western conflict management theories on the Nigerian culture

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**Abstract-** Although conflict management theories have been used in different contexts globally, there exists a huge gap in understanding whether the conflict management theories of the West are valid in a multi-cultural context like Nigeria. The purpose of this paper was therefore to investigate the validity of conflict management theories on culture in Nigeria. The paper utilized keywords, and alternate keywords to search for literature on organizational conflict management in Nigeria thereby relying on content evaluation as its methodology. It also sought to understand the Western concepts of conflict management and its influence on Nigerian culture. Based on the understanding generated by the key Western organizational conflict management theories and the evidence collected for organizational conflict resolution in Nigeria, it is considered that the majority of literature shows such wide contrasts based on a disparity of current cultural values that have replaced the traditional African values through the process of colonization and cultural transfer between successive generations. Colonization has led to enhanced-pluralism in an already pluralistic society and has increased the challenge for conflict resolution. There appears to be significant disparity with relation to organizational conflict management practices across Nigerian organizations.

**Index Terms-** culture, national culture, conflict, conflict management theories

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article guides a stepwise walkthrough by Experts for writing a successful journal or a research paper starting from inception of ideas till their publications. Research papers are highly recognized in scholar fraternity and form a core part of PhD curriculum. Research scholars publish their research work in leading journals to complete their grades. In addition, the published research work also provides a big weight-age to get admissions in reputed varsity. Now, here we enlist the proven steps to publish the research paper in a journal.

Is understanding of cultural conflict critical to conflict management or is it just a fad? Studies show that cross-cultural mediation records more failure when compared with mediation within an identical culture. This is due to the fact that cultures

represent diverse behaviors, styles of communication, and standards. Lack of understanding of cultures of individuals and groups on the negotiation table will create an impediment that will prevent a positive outcome (Shonk, 2020). For some time now, Nigeria has become infamous for diverse brands of conflicts. Discontentment over the distribution of resources, high rate of unemployment, religion and culture are among the cited causes of these conflicts. Some of these conflicts arise sporadically while others linger for some times. Britain, America, and other nations have attempted to negotiate peace at one time or the other with little or no success. The question then is whether or not the western organizational conflict management theories are valid within the cultural context of Nigeria. This paper will cover a comprehensive literature review, methodology, findings, and conclusion.

## Literature Review

Conflict is not necessarily bad in itself though it is often avoided. It may be good for both individuals and organizations if managed properly. Conflict emerges as a result of socio-psychological contacts (Coleman, et al 2014). Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary defines conflict as a dispute between people, organizations, or countries with opposing opinions. Conflict can take on any of several different forms in an organization. It can occur within an employee, between individuals or groups, and across organizations. Thus, the different types of conflicts include: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup and interorganizational conflict. According to Katz (2011) who is an American psychologist, there are three components of conflict which are economic conflict, value conflict, and power conflict. Economic conflict is brought about by a limited amount of resources within a locality as groups or individuals involved comes into conflicts to attain the most of these resources and therefore bringing forth hostile behaviors among those involved. On the other hand, value conflict is concerned with the varied preferences and ideologies that people have as their principles. Any conflicts driven by this factor are demonstrated in wars wherein separate parties have sets of beliefs that they assert in an aggressive manner. Finally, power conflict occurs when the parties involved intends to maximize what influence it has in the social setting. Such a situation can happen among individuals, groups or even nations (Katz & Kahn,

2008). In this regard, conflict becomes the rivalry within groups or individuals for incompatible goals, limited resources, or the sources of power needed to acquire them. Furthermore, it is a competition that is determined by individuals' perceptions of goals, resources, power and perceptions that may differ greatly among individuals. Wexler (2014) states that perception is a major component of culture. It is the socially inherited, shared and learned ways of living possessed by individuals in virtue of their membership in social groups.

### **Culture and Perceptual Differences**

Goal differentiations could emerge through divergent views of reality and differences as to the interpretation of what constitutes reality. The differences in the viewpoints will breed conflict. For instance, a football coach may consider a particular team member unfit to play a tournament, whereas, the medical doctor may certify him fit to play. Several elements may cause a department in an organization to create different perceptions of reality. According to

Konopaske (2011), the major elements include "status incongruity, inaccurate perceptions, and different perspectives. Status incongruity conflicts concerning the relative status of different groups are common" (p.308). Responding to the question of culture and perception, Wexler (2008) points out that "the relationship between the individual and the environment is so extensive that it almost overstates the distinction between the two to speak of a relationship at all" (p. 39). The working of the mind cannot be independent of their social environment.

### **National culture**

National culture is defined as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others (Hofstede, et al (2005). In contrast, organizational culture may be defined as the proper way to behave within an organization. This culture consists of shared beliefs and values established by leaders and then communicated and reinforced through various methods, ultimately shaping employee perceptions, behaviours and understanding (SHRM, 2020). Hofstede Theory of Cultural Dimensions is the most widely used theory for understanding the cultural orientation of countries and the institutions within them. The six dimensions described in the theoretical framework determine the psychological orientation of the individuals residing in the country, their interactions with other nationals as well as with other nationalities. Hofstede (2011) asserts that different social systems have different 'cultures', national and organizational cultures, in particular, are of different natures. However, studies find that there are shared dimensions between national and organizational cultures and that national culture, although distinct from organizational culture, has a significant effect on it (Shailashree & Mlemba, 2016; de Hilal, 2006; Szydło Grześ-Bukłaho, 2020). Intuitively, it may be concluded that the effect of the national culture will be exerted in some measure on the organizations working in the country and that employee's perception, acceptance, and application of organizational culture will be shaped by the national culture. Szydło & Grześ-Bukłaho (2020) find that alignment of

organizational culture to national culture has significant psychological effect on employees who are able to anticipate and respond more accurately to organizational events, and can better plan their actions. The effect persists for foreign takeovers also who find that employees continue to be guided by their own beliefs and culture, and significant conflict arises when they are constrained to act against cultural values. However, some studies negate this relationship and find little or no effect of national culture on shaping organizational culture (Nazarian et al., 2013; Gerhart, 2009, Ansah & Louw, 2019). Ansah & Louw (2019) find that resource-based organizations limit the impact of national culture on organizational culture.

According to Draft (2010), organizations are social entities that are goal-focused, designed, and deliberately structured with systemic coordinated activities that are linked to the external environment. This social entity consists of individuals who relate with others for their common good. In his observations, Jones (2013) noted that organizational theory is the study of what organizations do and how they carry out their activities. The activities in one way or the other do affect and are affected by the environment where they operate. Ivancevich, et al (2011) indicate that while an organization can be viewed as a whole entity, it is made up of individuals with individual characteristics, motivations, rewards, and stress. The results of individual or group behaviour in an organization that is either negative or positive, given the set goals. Negative reaction arises due to conflicts. Meanwhile, Mullins (2016) argues that conflict in organizations is unavoidable. The conflict has both external and internal dynamics - cultural and non-cultural dimensions.

### **Methodology**

This study was based on desktop research where information was obtained using keywords and alternate keywords were used to search Google Scholar for literature on organizational conflict management in Nigeria. An initial attempt was made to understand the Western concept of conflict management theories. Literature referencing traditional Nigerian culture was also sourced. The abstracts of studies were read through to determine their relevancy, based on which full texts were extracted. Since this study had a single aim, this was the major focus of the extracted studies for a review and comparison among them with no focus on thematic analysis.

### **Findings**

Colonization has led to enhanced-pluralism in an already pluralistic society and it has increased the challenge for conflict resolution (Scholte, 1996). Although such a practice is not a new one either with evidence for peace-oriented conflict resolution and management through feudalism and family arbitrators prior to the colonization period, there appears to be significant disparity with relation to organizational conflict management practices across Nigerian organizations. Based on an understanding generated for the key Western organizational conflict management theories and the evidence collected for organizational conflict resolution in Nigeria, it is considered that the majority of literature reviewed shows such wide contrasts in findings based on a disparity of

current cultural values that have replaced the traditional African values through the process of colonization, antagonizing the process of cultural transfer between successive generations.

Croucher (2011) investigated the impact of national and religious relationship on the conflict styles of Christians and Muslims in Western Europe. The results showed that, national and religious identification had a considerable impact on conflict style preference. Muslims preferred conflict styles that are more compromising and obliging whereas Christians preferred the dominant type. Similarly, in a study that examined the influence of ethnic background, ethnic identity, and cultural identity on conflict styles among African Americans, Ting-Toomey, et al (2000) found out that Latino(a) Americans and Asian Americans use avoiding and third party conflict styles more than African Americans.

Although conflict management in Nigerian organizations is still a relatively under-studied concept (Adomi, & Anie, 2006; Obasan, 2011; Olu, & Abolade, 2014), there is nevertheless emerging literature facilitating an academic understanding for the phenomenon and process within the country. Nigeria is a pluralistic society with diversity not only in ethnic groups but also religions practiced. Given the pre-colonization memories of cultural practices and current pluralism, understanding African culture (including Nigerian) is a challenge among researchers (Chima & Alokpa, 2015). It is however noteworthy that the majority of the literature on conflict management has been undertaken within educational institutions with a relative few in public organizations (Balay, 2006; Broukhim, et al 2019; Sergeeva, et al 2020). This indicates that conflict management in the country is simply being studied within the same society, which is a challenge due to pluralism within the society.

Ojo & Abolade (2014) while exemplifying the Power Holding Company of Nigeria contend that in Nigerian public organizations, conflict management strategies are instituted, structured and exemplified by leaders who then both collaborate and facilitate the conflict management process. This is because leaders are viewed as authority figures and hence their contribution is considered most important. This also coincides with the traditional cultural orientation towards conflict management in Africa prior to colonization. Ademowo (2015) speaks of a liberal African society where conflict resolution was chiefly undertaken by leaders in an informal setting, yet the authority figures of the leaders bound all conflicting parties to a unanimous peace settlement. Although the nature of these leaders' styles was not investigated prior to African colonization, current investigations such as Odetunde's (2013) reveal that transformational leaders are better at conflict resolution than transactional leaders in Nigeria. Ademowo (2015) and Ademowo and Adekunle (2013) further reports that conflict resolution in pre-colonized Africa was not only peace-oriented but also pre-emptive, with families being an important instrument of the conflict management.

In another study by Irene, et al (2017), it was shown that Nigerian organizations prefer to employ compromise between stakeholders. However, compromise according to academic literature reviewed

is a situation where one party foregoes its own terms and conditions and agrees to those of the other party, only so that peace can be maintained. It is questionable whether employers and employees agree to a compromise, while it may yet be plausible that collaboration is undertaken to arrive at a decision geared to appease a majority of the stakeholders invoking the conflict while not completely foregoing management stance either. However, according to Osabiya (2005), this is merely speculation as a question on the results. Irrespective of a collaborative approach to conflict management taken by the case study participants, however, Ojo and Abolade (2014) identified the need for training of employees within the context of conflict management because communication skills between employees are seen to be lacking (Owan, 2018). Contrary to Ojo & Abolade (2014), Owan (2018) however find that teachers working in secondary schools in the Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River State area of Nigeria rarely taking the others' perspective in consideration. They state that:

“many academic staff revealed that they cannot displease themselves to please other people during conflict resolution, they do not consider others' point of view, and many are not ready to build harmony with their colleagues even when they are at fault” (p. 90-91).

This appears to be a form of competition theory in principle yet there appears to be no evidence for such a cultural orientation in Nigeria either pre- or post-colonization. A prior study, Adomi and Anie (2006) also found that the majority of conflicts with Nigerian institutions appears to be of an inter-personal nature and this is why management is required to intervene amongst employees as non-intervention leads to negative performances. However, contrary to Owan (2018), Adomi and Anie (2006) found accommodation to be the chief resolution technique employed for management of these conflicts. Also contrary to Adomi and Anie (2006), at least two studies, Uchendu, et al (2013) and Olaleye and Arogundade (2013) found conflicts between a diverse range of stakeholders rather than simply between employees. Even so, Olaleye and Arogundade (2013) found that inter-personal conflicts are the major type. Also, interestingly, in another study in an educational institution, Fatile and Adejuwon (2011) found that students engage in conflicts for a variety of reasons although these reasons have not been discussed. An important contribution of the study is that an autocratic approach based on competition theory is being used by management to tackle student issues which is counter-productive as students remain aggressive and agitated even while no solution is reached. The researchers suggest that students should be involved in the decision-making process as this will not only facilitate the conflict management process but will also be a source of stopping the conflict process itself.

The results reported in this study are actually in contrast to the cultural orientation of the country, prior to colonization and application of the peace-keeping and peace-building processes administered in the traditional African society (Ademowo, 2015). However, Ndubuisi, et al (2010) assert that irrespective of social culture, organizational cultures in Nigeria reveal an autocratic and bossy leadership with significant financial disparities between each top level of management. The researchers also assert that there is a strong culture of favouritism which hinders the conflict

resolution process. While conflict may generally be viewed negatively by onlookers, the collaboration of leadership towards peace facilitation through mediation can also lead to creativity in problem-solving (Ojo & Abolade, 2014; Ajike et al, 2015). In particular, the importance of communication has been identified in almost all the studies reviewed above. Adomi and Anie (2006) state that with effective communication between management and employees, a majority of the conflicts would cease to exist. Additionally, management through ethics and transparency has been recommended to avoid a show of favouritism, which appears to be a cultural issue (Van de Vliert, 2011; Owan, 2018).

Cultural contexts are increasingly being recognized to have a strong influence on management theories (Deutsch, et al 2011; Le Nguyen & Larimo, 2011). However, since a majority of conflict management theories were largely structured and developed in modern developed countries such as the US or parts of Europe, diversity in culture and its socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts have been ignored in such literature (Barkema et al, 2015). Allwood (2011) contends that understanding conflict management literature from a non-Western perspective is also a challenge because of the difference in contextual applications that arise chiefly from cultural perspectives. Earlier, Morris, et al (1998) corroborated the place of culture in management of conflict by the report of a survey of young managers in the US, China, Philippines and India. The study finds support for two hypotheses about cultural difference in a conflict style and the cultural values that account for these differences: Chinese managers rely more on an avoiding style because of their relatively high value on conformity and tradition while the US managers rely more on a completing style because of their relatively high value on individual achievement.

### **Conflict management theories**

Conflict management relates to managing conflict whether this is between nations, individuals or organizations or any other stakeholders in a social or commercial environment (Deutsch et al, 2011). Conflict is unavoidable where human teams interact (McKibben, 2017; Olu & Adesubomi, 2014). Within the context of the organization, conflict management relates to strategies that help employees to manage or altogether avoid conflict with others within the organization, whether this is fellow workers, subordinates or leaders. Western principles on conflict management are quite simplistic and cater to an optimistic vision of first identifying a conflict, then work around strategies to manage the source and process of conflict (Lederach, 2015). Hence, type of conflict or identification of the nature of conflict is essential (Bercovitch, 2019). Conversely, a cultural approach to conflict resolution is more challenging (Wallenstein, 2018; Ramsbotham, et al, 2011). This is because the subtle influences of cultures that form the background to employees' perceptions of conflict will often take precedence over the conventional and traditional approach to conflict resolution.

The West understands conflict management generally according to Coleman, et al (2014) which identify avoiding, accommodating, compromising, collaboration, and competition as the available

approaches to handling individuals as well as organizational conflicts.

### **Avoiding**

According to Deutsch et al (2011), some employees tend to take an avoidance stance to particular problems within organizations hoping that it will either delay the conflict or eventually dissipates naturally when no actor or minimal stakeholders are involved. Essentially, in this type of conflict management, people from avoidance cultures remain aloof and like the ostrich, keep their heads hidden for fear of having to acknowledge the conflict and become a part of the conflict against their will. Again, Deutsch et al (2011) state that those people who have high levels of hostility or anger within them also tend to avoid conflict for fear of escalation. However, Wang, et al (2012) argue that avoidance cannot be equated with passiveness. Rather, avoidance is itself a strong message that shows the individual does not want to lose out on his perspective and this essentially becomes his goal. While initial studies like Rubin et al (1994) thought of avoidance strategies as being devoid of goals within the organizational context, Wang et al (2012) argue that far from this assumption, unless the issue is for pretending that there appears to be nothing wrong or withdrawal, avoidance strategies become a kind of power play to allow achievement of different goals.

### **Accommodation**

Employees who come from accommodating cultures view each other on an even keel and will be willing to listen to each other's opinions and perspectives prior to explaining their own viewpoints. Such type of employees subconsciously gives the message that they are aware that there are people who may think differently from themselves and that they are willing to respect the other's perspective by at least listening to them and trying to understand what the other person is saying without judgment. People who favour the accommodation approach to conflict management believe that there is no sacrifice worth more than maintaining peace (Longe, 2015). It appears to be a palliative method in which the root cause of the conflict is not addressed but focus is on maintaining peace, irrespective of surrendering self-needs for those of the other agency in the conflict (Pavlakis et al, 2011). The positive influence of this theoretical construct is that it may lead to strong collaboration between stakeholders when sacrifices are made for positive outcomes for the whole unit (Kaitelidou et al, 2012).

### **Compromising**

This type of organizational conflict management perspective is evident when individuals agree that pulling a conflict will only enlarge it with minimal resolution. Employees who compromise are willing to see the positivity and advantage in the bigger picture over the long run rather being bogged down by petty issues. Hence, compromisers tend to look towards actions and processes that can potentially satisfy a larger number of people as the objective is to maintain peace but not at individual costs (McKibben, 2017). Although this may appear to be similar to accommodation discussed above, there is a significant difference.

Accommodators sacrifice their own needs while compromisers find a solution that is acceptable to the majority of people, much like an intermediate solution that is acceptable to the majority of stakeholders. Strong leaders favour compromise, especially in multidisciplinary and multicultural teams such as healthcare teams (McKibben, 2017).

### **Collaboration**

In this type of conflict management strategy, employees try to find middle ground where they both agree to find solutions that are advantageous to both irrespective of holding their original stance on a conflict. This does not necessarily indicate understanding of the other's objectives; rather it also relates to loss suffered by self if the employee remains adamant for his position. Finding a common middle ground is likely to provide solutions without either party having to back down or pull out and without compromising on original ideas. Brubaker et al (2014) contend that the majority of organizations in the US have been following collaborative management to organizational conflict resolution. Negotiations based on mediation and facilitation skills are the chief medium through which collaboration is undertaken (Leathes, 2012; Brubaker et al, 2014). However, if there are few people who are willing to take a neutral position when entering into negotiations, this aspect is likely to compromise the collaborative process (Leathes, 2012).

### **Competition**

This is perhaps a more aggressive strategy for conflict management as the employee is determined to compete and win and will go the extra mile to prove his point (Abraham, et al, 2019). People who live in competitive cultures are likely to be assertive and do not give up, preferring to show their perspective on a conflict through practical processes while neither taking the time nor the effort to understand the position of the other party in the conflict (Gelfand et al, 2012). The focus is on winning and outwitting the other party indicating high self-worth and egoism, and is indicative of people coming from dominating conflict cultures, with gender dominance being an especially important factor in this theoretical process (Lee, et al 2018). Such cultures have a historical background of dominance where confrontation for settlement of an issue is encouraged and the focus is the theory that the stronger individual wins, whether he does this by shouting, yelling or other aggressive forms of making his point clear (Gelfand, et al, 2012).

Africa presents a rather intriguing but complex challenge to understanding the theoretical and practical applicability of western conflict management theories (Bozeman, 2015). This is because although Africa has a strong socio-cultural diversity, the purity of impact that this diversity has had on conflict management theories is questionable largely due to the influence brought about by colonization in many African countries (Ogar, et al, 2019; Bozeman, 2015). Nigeria follows western management concepts at the official level yet it is also culturally pulled in different directions at the individual and social level (Jackson, 2011; 2013). However, since the majority of conflict management theories are western in origin, they are applied to different geographical areas

despite being incompatible in essential contexts even without formulating culture-specific theories. The main argument presented towards this lack of focus for local conflict theory management is the fear that it will yield even more theories that are likely to overwhelm rather than contribute meaningfully to cultural contexts (Adeboye, 2013). However, gaining an understanding for the distinction between idealized western concepts within the non-western regions is important if a nation is to be understood within the parameters of its local environment and how this environment engages stakeholders to provide appropriate social exchanges within the formal organization (Hwang, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

The understanding of conflict management theories through cultural perspectives is an important determinant for organizational performance (Longe, 2015). The aim of this study was to understand if Western organizational conflict management theories are valid within the cultural context of Nigeria. Based on an understanding generated for the key Western organizational conflict management theories and the evidence collected for organizational conflict resolution in Nigeria, it is considered that the majority of literature as reviewed above shows such wide contrasts in findings based on a disparity of current cultural values that have replaced the traditional African values through the process of colonization, antagonizing the process of cultural transfer between successive generations.

Nigeria has always been a pluralistic society with respect to its ethnic fragmentation and diversity yet this feature has enhanced post-colonization with the introduction of other religions such as Christianity. Although this mix may have admittedly increased the challenge for conflict resolution, such a practice is not a new one either with evidence for peace-oriented conflict resolution and management through feudalism and family arbitrators prior to the colonization period.

The researchers conclude that scholars who argue for a cultural context to conflict management regard cultures as distinct from basic human nature, which essentially experiences conflict within an individual and collective capacity for more or less the same reasons and classification and compartmentalization of these reasons based on cultural characteristics appears to be a biased process. However, it is also apparent that the response of humans towards the issues that raise conflict situations is definitely culture-oriented. Within the context of the current study arguing whether or not Western organizational conflict management theories are valid within the cultural environment of Nigeria, it can be considered that there appears to be conflict within the learned principles of Western policies and organizational responses to these policies. For instance, Western organizational conflict management theories require dialogue and arbitration, as well as open lines of communication, yet there is mixed evidence within organizational studies of management doing so.

### **Limitations and Applications**

The main limitation of the current study is that it is based on available literature that pertains majorly to tertiary educational organizations while the researchers' preference is towards the multicultural organization. This study can be used as a guide for more structured investigations.

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