Workplace Conflict Management Styles among Nigerian Employees

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Abstract: *Conflict is all pervasive in nature and organizations around the world are not untouched with it. Present study deals with interpersonal conflict in corporate and academic organizations of Nigeria. The study has a non-experimental, descriptive, and quantitative research design, in which a sample size of 88 Nigerian employees was analyzed through stratified random sampling. Statistical measure like bivariate correlation and chi square tests were employed to analyze the data. Examination of various independent variables and findings of the research reveal that there is a significant difference in how employees of differ in their approach to conflict handling. Interpersonal conflict understanding is crucial for smooth functioning of globalized organizations. Managers today are devising innovative handling techniques as conflict poses a great challenge for them. The present study can facilitate the management practitioners in understanding the concept and its implications in Nigerian context.*
Key words: *Organizations, Conflict, Handling Style, Employees, Nigeria*

I. Introduction, Rationale and Literature Review

Interpersonal conflict –which is the underlying essence of the present research-is considered to be one of the most difficult challenges organizational members face (Phillips and Cheston, 1979) and one of the most frustrating and uncomfortable experiences for managers (Earnest and McCaslin, 1994). Conflicts are the chief reality of organizations and the basic political systems in organizations through which conflict is signified is observed in many organizations (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Zald and Berger, 1978; Noon and Blyton, 2002). According to Roloff (1987), "organizational conflict occurs when members engage in activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network, members of other collectivities, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of the organization" (p. 496).

Conflict is a term commonly having negative connotation, but organizations today are trying to understand the functionalities of conflict as not all conflicts are good or bad (interactionist viewpoint). Understanding the optimal level of conflict, which is neither too much nor too little, is the best bet for businesses. Thus researches in organizational conflict and its management are gaining much currency in contemporary times.

The relevance of present study is that in organizations, interpersonal conflict is prevalent and troublesome for managers (Putnam, 1988), thus the need of the study. Further it is reported that middle managers are spending 25 percent of their time handling conflict (Meyer et al., 1997). Measures like proper planning, mediation, and evaluation of conflict management strategies and developing partnerships with workers are recommended by managers to deal with dysfunctional organizational conflict.

Directing conflict in a positive or negative way may affect the nature of the conflict whether beneficial or destructive (Cetin and Hacifazlioglu, 2004). It is imperative to understand that if interpersonal conflicts are not handled appropriately, it can lead to bad feelings, high turnover and costly litigation (Hirschman, 2001). Nonetheless, if dealt with suitably, conflict can increase the innovativeness and productivity of individuals' (Uline et al., 2003), further offering the interpersonal relationship satisfaction, creative problem solving, the growth of the global workforce, and domestic workplace diversity (TingToomey and Oetzel, 2001, p. 3) and leads to "improved efficiency, creativity, and profitability" (Axelrod and Johnson, 2005, p. 42).

Litterer (1966) defines conflict as "a type of behavior which occurs when two or more parties are in opposition or in battle as a result of a perceived relative deprivation from the activities of or interacting with another person or group". Tedeschi et al. (1973) term conflict as "an interactive state in which the behaviors or goals of one actor are to some degree incompatible with the behaviors or goals of some other actor or actors" (p. 232). Here "actor" refers to any social entity, starting from the individual to the corporate body itself.

Smith (1966) defines conflict as "a situation in which the conditions, practices, or goals for the different participants are inherently incompatible". The difference between the views of Smith and Litterer is whereas former deem conflict as a situation, the latter considers it as a type of behavior. However, both of these authors and Tedeschi et al. consider conflict to result from incompatibility or opposition in goals, activities, or interaction among the social entities.

Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory (ROCI I and II) instruments have been widely used in various researches on organizational conflict. A study done by Lee (2008) in major industries of Malaysia found that subordinates were more satisfied with their superiors' supervision through their exercise of integrating, compromising, and obliging styles. Meanwhile, subordinates who perceived their superiors as primarily utilizing dominating and avoiding style viewed them as incompetent in supervision and thus lowering their level of job satisfaction.

Analyzing the relationship between biological sex, gender role, organizational status and conflict management behavior in three comparable organizations, Brewer et al. (2002) found dominating style among masculine and avoiding style among feminine individuals. Additionally it was confirmed that employees on upper level positions used integrative while lower level management cadres used avoiding and obliging styles of conflict handling.

The main focus of the present study is interpersonal conflict. Antonioni (1998) has opined that interpersonal conflict tend to occur when there is a struggle or between people with opposing needs and ideas, beliefs and goals and he further reports that gender in general had little relationship with the variance of the conflict-management style. Many studies have dealt with the sources of conflict but there is a general lack of empirical support as they are mostly theoretical conceptualizations (Van Tonder, Havenga and Visagie, 2008). Nelson and Quick (2001, p. 424–8) has given structural reasons (those that develop from within the organization and initiate from the manner in which work is organized), and personal factors, which crop up as a result of individual differences among employees as sources of conflict.

Researchers have also found no difference between men and women in conflict handling if they were on same status in the organization (Brewer et al. op. cit.; Korabik et al., 1993; Renwick, 1977). Antonioni op. cit. claims that age usually had little relationship with the conflict-management style. Friedman et al. (2000) associate individual conflict styles and employees' experience of stress. His research emphasizes that those who use a more integrative style experience lower levels of task conflict, reducing relationship conflict, which reduces stress. Further those who exercise more of dominating or avoiding style experience higher levels of task conflict, increasing relationship conflict and stress.

An exploratory study of interpersonal conflict handling in multinational organizations in India reported one third of all the conflicts and that of boss-subordinate (often) did not get resolved. Additionally, communication, whether by mutual consent, by management intervention, or by developing better interpersonal relationship helped in conflict resolution in majority of the cases (Gupta and Sasidhar, 2010).

To understand the effect of organizational conflict on organizational performance as well as causes, types, reason and strategies for managing conflicts in some service organizations in Nigeria, Hotepo et. al. (2010) found that limited resources were the chief cause of conflict. Examining the challenges and prospects of effective industrial conflict resolution in Nigeria, Akume & Abdullahi (2013) put lack of signed agreement with labour unions as one of the reasons for conflicts.

Numerous studies (De Dreu and Vliert, 1997; Tjosvold, 1997) propose that conflict is a positive force if handled appropriately. In contemporary heterogeneous organizational environment the possibility of using conflict as a driving force to sustain competitive spirit, growth and innovation rather than an unconstructive, crippling force, is crucial. Consequently the focus has therefore shifted from prevention of conflicts to management of conflicts (Callanan et al., 2006). A study on manufacturing and service organizations in Nigeria has espoused the use of the Creative-Contingency Model of Conflict Management as an enduring answer to conflict situations in firms (Osisioma et. al. 2012).

In a study of Julius Berger Nigeria Plc. Bonny Island, Nigeria, integration of all stakeholders' interests was a suggested way to reduce conflicts in organizations among both the managerial and non managerial employees. Promotion of industrial democracy, regular management/employees meetings, and strict implementation of collective agreements and regular review of personnel policies were another recommended measure to check organizational conflicts in the study (Agwu, 2013).

## II.   Conceptual Framework and Objectives

Ohbuchi and Fukushima (1997) describe interpersonal conflict as an event in which an individual potentially jeopardizes another's goals, wishes, or expectations. The conceptual framework for the study encompassed independent and dependent variables as illustrated in figure 1. The independent variables included the demographic ones like gender, age, nationality, income, qualification, marital status and employees' tenure in the profession.

The dependent variables comprises of conflict handling styles which are typically seen as a response to particular situations. According to Wilmot & Hocker (2001), conflict management styles are patterned responses or clusters of behavior individuals' use in conflict situations utilizing various interaction methods (p. 130). Concern for self and for others has been identified as two fundamental elements of handling interpersonal

conflict (Follet, 1940; Thomas, 1976; Rahim and Bonoma, 1979). On the basis of them five styles of handling conflict have been described by Sorenson and Hawkins (1995) as follows:

a. **Integrating style**, identified with problem solving, has high concern for self and others. It involves the assessment of differences so that an effective solution can be reached, acceptable to conflicting parties. It is further associated with openness and exchange of information for the purpose.

b. **Obliging Style** has high concern for others and low for self, it is related to emphasizing commonalities and playing down the differences to satisfy the concern of other party.

c. An employee having **Compromising Style** acts to serve as intermediary in concern with self and others, which means a reciprocal relationship to make a mutually acceptable decision.

d. **Dominating style** has high concern for self and low for others. This style is associated with forcing behavior to win one's position.

e. **Avoiding style** is associated with pulling out or sidestepping from a situation and passing the buck. The peculiarity of this approach is low concern for others as well as for self.

Figure: 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study Independent Variables
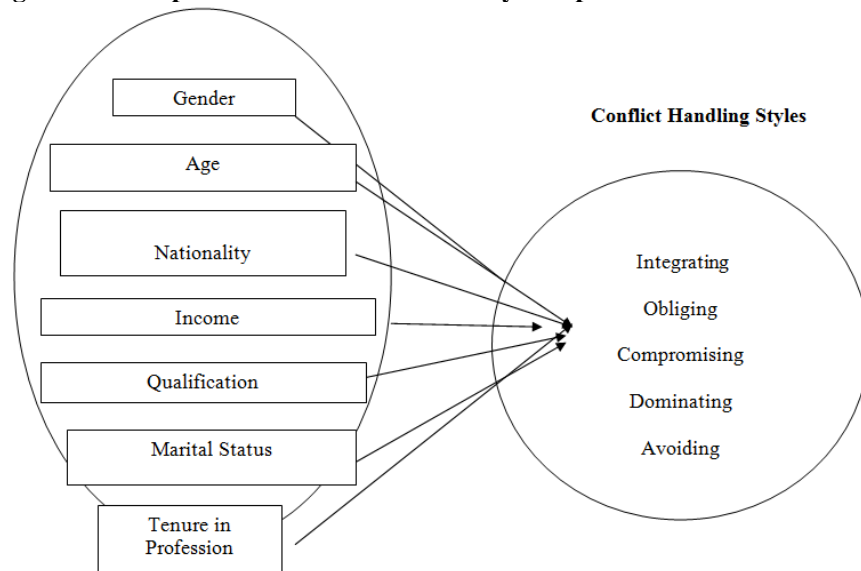
The conceptual suggestion of the study is employees' conflict handling styles (dependent variables) would be affected and differed by the independent variables, thus the objective of conducting the present study was to investigate the conflict management styles based on these variables among the Nigerian employees. Further it seeks to understand the differences and parallel of the workers of the country and draw inferences thereof and to aid the same. Below mentioned hypotheses were tested.

III.   Statement of Hypothesis

"Hypothesis testing is a systematic procedure for deciding whether the results of a research study, which examines a sample, support a particular theory or practical innovation, which applies to a population" (Aron et al., 2007, p.115). Based on the above mentioned conceptual frame work the following null hypotheses are affirmed.

3.1. Null Hypothesis (H$_0$)

There is no significant country wise difference in conflict management style used among employees in organizations.

3.2. Null Hypothesis (H$_0$)

Age has no significant effect on conflict handling among employees in Nigeria.

3.3. Null Hypothesis (H$_0$)

There is no income differential in conflict handling for Nigerian employees.

3.4. Null Hypothesis (H$_0$)

There is no significant gender based difference in conflict handling styles among Nigerian employees.

3.5. Null Hypothesis (H_0)
Education leads to no significant difference in conflict handling styles among Nigerian employees.

3.6. Null Hypothesis (H_0)
There is no significant difference between married and single employees in handling conflict among Nigerians.

3.7. Null Hypothesis (H_0)
Number of years of work experience has no significant difference in conflict handling among Nigerian employees.

3.8. Null Hypothesis (H_0)
There is no significant difference among Nigerian employees conflict handling styles on the basis of work hours.

IV. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Sample
The present study employed a non-experimental, descriptive, and quantitative research design with primary data having a sample size of 88. Not withholding rejected samples 41 responses were included in the study. The employees were from corporate (financial, marketing and information technology) and educational sectors of the economy. The data was collected using stratified random sampling, the strata being gender based.

4.2. Participant Profile
There were 58% males in the samples and more married respondents in the data. Most of the respondents were of above 40 years age group (36.4%) and having income of N35,000-N40.000. The sample also shows 50% of respondent having work experience of between 8-9 years (19.1%). Some respondents from Education sector with doctorates were also added to make data more even. Average work hour for the employees was 9.28 hours.

4.3. Reliability of Statistics and Instrumentation
No pilot study was done here as the instrument's (five point Likert type scale) validity was already tested in the study based on Indian sample (Abbas & Joshi, 2013). Some items were removed and a few added to append the reliability value of the scale. The reliability coefficient for the factors was: Integrating Style, .635; Obliging Style, .605; Compromising Style, .590; Dominating style, .573; Avoiding Style, .669 and the overall scale value being .721. Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) consider values that vary around 0.50 as being the lower limit of acceptability for that reason all the above mentioned values are thus deemed acceptable. Table 1 demonstrates the reliability statistics of the present study, having constructs with adequate reliability.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics		
Factors	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Integrating Style	.635	5
Obliging Style	.605	6
Compromising Style	.590	3
Dominating Style	.573	4
Avoiding Style	.669	5
Overall Scale	.721	23

4.4. Other Statistical Tools
Some other statistical tools employed in for the analysis of the findings were Pearson chi square test, one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and related procedures thereof like test of homogeneity of variance (Levene Statistics), post hoc multiple comparisons where equality of variances are not assumed (Games-Howell test), Pearson correlations (bivariate). Besides simple means and percentages is also brought to use. Statistical Package Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16 was used for the analysis of data.

V. Data Analyses, Hypotheses Testing and Findings

5.1. Country wise Differences in Conflict Handling

Table 2 displays the differentials in conflict handling styles with the country of origin as independent variable. It is apparent that Nigerian employees excel in compromising, integrating and obliging styles with mean score of 4.12, 3.80 and 3.72 in that order.

Table 2: Descriptive Group Statistics and Directional Measures-Country (n=41) *(independent sample t test)*

Factors	M	SD	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed
Integrating Style	3.80	.406			
Obliging Style	3.72	.586			
Compromising Style	4.12	.584			
Dominating Style	2.44	.641			
Avoiding Style	3.44	.725			

The t-tests revealed significant differences among Nigerian employees in integrating, t=-6.138, p<.05, obliging, t=-6.228, p<.05, compromising t=-3.565, p<.05 and dominating styles, t=3.499, p<.05 thereby rejecting the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in conflict management style used among them for these factors. While there was no significant difference in avoiding style of conflict handling among Nigerians with t=1.854, p>.05, which accepts the null hypothesis for avoiding style.

5.2. Age and Conflict Handling

Table 3: Bivariate Correlations (Age)

		Age	Integrating Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
Age	Pearson Correlation	1	-.022	-.116	-.230[*]	.049	-.101
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.842	.280	.031	.653	.351
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Bivariate correlation to measure relationship between the independent variable age and all the five conflict handling was employed for the data. Nonetheless only compromising style shows statistically significant negative correlation with age at r=-.230, p<0.05 (significance value =.031) among Nigerians employees. Therefore null hypothesis age has no significant effect on conflict handling between employees is rejected for these factors.

5.3. Income based Differentials in Conflict Handling

Table 4: Bivariate Correlations (Income)

		Income	Integrating Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
Income	Pearson Correlation	1	-.212[*]	-.058	-.189	.162	.006
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.047	.591	.078	.132	.955
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88

Nigerian employees as the income increases they are likely to be less integrative in organizational conflict handling. (r= -.212, p<0.05). Therefore null hypothesis that there is no income differential in conflict handling Nigerian employees stand rejected for these factors.

5.4. Gender based Differences

One way analysis of variance show a statistically significant difference in all the conflict handling techniques with gender taken as independent variable. F (3,187) = 15.898, 14.023, 6.839, 13.558, 6.610 and Levene statistic 8.464, 5.086, 22.758, 3.254 and 12.164 for integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating and avoiding styles of conflict handling correspondingly (p<.05 in all the cases) establishes the same.

Multiple Comparisons
Games-Howell

Dependent Variable		Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Integrating Style	Males	-.646*	.101	.000	-.91	-.38
	Females	-.579*	.112	.000	-.87	-.29
	Males	-.358*	.092	.001	-.60	-.12
	Females	-.291*	.103	.030	-.56	-.02
Obliging Style	Males	-.405*	.129	.012	-.74	-.07
	Females	-.616*	.115	.000	-.92	-.31
	Males	-.438*	.114	.001	-.74	-.14
	Females	-.648*	.099	.000	-.91	-.39
Compromising Style	Males	-.576*	.164	.004	-1.01	-.14
	Males	-.245*	.084	.022	-.46	-.03
Dominating Style						
	Males	.919*	.185	.000	.43	1.41
	Females	.798*	.176	.000	.33	1.26
Avoiding Style		-.620*	.173	.004	-1.08	-.16
	Males	.500*	.131	.001	.16	.84
	Females	.472*	.137	.006	.11	.83

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Therefore Games Howell procedure is employed, which states that there is a significant difference among males and females for Integrating and obliging styles of conflict handling. Amongst male and female employees of Nigeria there is a significance difference in handing conflicts for compromising, dominating and avoiding styles. Males and female however have significant difference in handling conflict for dominating and avoiding styles of conflict handling (p<.05 in all the cases, please refer to table above). Null hypothesis that there no significant gender based difference in conflict handling styles among Nigerian employees stands rejected for the above mentioned strata.

5.5. Conflict Handling on the basis of Qualification of Employees

Correlations

		Qualification	Integrating Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
Qualification	Pearson Correlation	1	-.159	.072	-.262*	-.077	-.291**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.138	.507	.014	.478	.006
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In the Nigerian employees, its negative significant correlation for compromising (r= -.262, p<0.05) and avoiding (r= -.262, p<0.01) styles. Therefore it can be safely said that as the educational levels of the Nigerian employees increase, they are less compromising and avoiding in conflicts. Null hypothesis education leads to no significant difference in conflict handling styles among Nigerian employees stands rejected for the above mentioned techniques of conflict handling.

5.6. Marital Status and Conflict Handling

In a study of military personnel in Nigeria on conflict handling strategy, main and interactive effect of marital status was found to be insignificant (Yara and Tunde-Yara, 2010). Chi-square test values for all the conflict handling techniques show a very significant relationship between marital status and conflict handling styles for Nigerian employees (refer to table below). The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between married and single employees in handling conflict among Nigerians is rejected.

Test Statistics

	Marital	Integrating Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
Chi-Square	55.182	30.727	1.228E2	1.097E2	66.091	47.000
Df	2	1	3	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

5.7. Conflict Handling based on Number of Years Experience of Employees

It was discovered in the study that Nigerian employees have negative correlation with compromising (r= -.329, p<0.01), dominating (r= -.219, p<0.05) and avoiding (r= -.287, p<0.01) styles, which implies that as the occupational experience increases they give less concession, are in lower side of control and are less avoid in the organizational conflict situations. Thus for these conflict handling styles, null hypothesis that number of years of work experience has no significant difference in conflict handling in Nigerian employees stands rejected.

Correlations

		Experience	Integrating Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
Experience	Pearson Correlation	1	.005	.105	-.329**	-.219*	-.287**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.966	.328	.002	.040	.007
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5.8. Work Hour and Conflict

The data with r =.-250, p<0.05 only compromising style shows significant difference with work hours, as it increase the Nigerian employees are less conciliating in conflict handling. Rest of the styles shows no significant differences. Thus the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference among Nigerian employees conflict handling styles on the basis of work hours stand rejected for these factors.

Correlations

		Working Hour	Integrating Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
Working Hour	Pearson Correlation	1	-.054	-.006	-.250*	-.129	-.103
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.616	.958	.019	.233	.338
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

VI.   Discussion, Limitation, Implication and Conclusion

In the present study interpersonal conflict and its handling was researched in the Nigerian context. After establishing the reliability of the study through Cronbach's alpha, the hypotheses of the study were tested. Nigerian employees were having statistically significant difference in the ways they handle conflicts in their organizations except for avoiding style. They were found to be integrating, obliging and compromising in handling organizational conflicts.

Nigerian employee were less obliging in conflict handling with advanced age as well as less compromising and avoiding. There is a very significant difference between the married and single employees in all the conflict handling styles. Nigerians are on lesser side of compromising, dominating, avoiding styles and less compromising in such situation.

Knowing the causal relationship between conflict and its sources and secondly outcome of the same are limitations of the present research and implication for further researches. Nonetheless, development of valid and reliable measure of interpersonal conflict in a country wise comparative context can be facilitated through the study for today's globalized organizations. It can be easily concluded here that several demographic variables have important role to play as far as conflict and its handling is concerned in Nigeria. A better understanding of discrepancies, disagreements, unconstructive and negative perceptions and emotions can be facilitated through the use of present study for further researches.

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