

Exploring Cultural Values in Conflict Management: A Qualitative Study of University Heads of Department

Abstract

Purpose: Organisational management research has, in the main restricted our understanding on the impact of culture on conflict management using a one dimensional collectivism/individualism model of Hofstede's cultural theory. The present study extends this knowledge area by adopting a more comprehensive analysis of Hofstede's fourfold dimensional typology – power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity as a conceptual lens to investigate how national culture impacts interpersonal conflict management of those in leadership positions in higher education institutions. Specifically, this article explores the extent to which cultural values influence conflict management practices of university heads of department.

Design/methodology/approach: Adopting a qualitative approach, 36 interviews were conducted with heads of different departments across a variety of disciplines in selected Nigerian universities.

Findings: The study's results conceptualise underlying cultural norms promoting paternalism, servility, and social relations influence conflict-handling strategies adopted by university heads of department. Consequently, it emerged from our thematic analysis that status-based dictates, a normative emphasis on communality, masculine hegemony and religious motivation shape conflict-handling choices in Nigeria as opposed to such choices in western cultures, that refer much less to these benevolent and integrative values.

Limitation/implications: The study focused on a small group of research subjects. Although it is not a sample that enables generalisation, our findings provide theoretical insights into how cultural ascendancy frames conflict resolution. This research is especially relevant as it is run in a culture different from the ones that were originally investigated and in which managerial books and mainstream practices emerged and thus, can contribute to challenge and enhance theory.

Originality/value: The study seeks to advance knowledge on the interface between culture and conflict management from a Sub-Saharan African context where literature is scarce.

Keywords: Conflict management, Hofstede's cultural theory, cultural values, heads of department, Nigerian universities

Introduction

The diverse ways in which cultures differ in terms of conflict management practices, especially within the workplace, has been a key area of organisational research interest (Neuliep and Johnson, 2016). While interpersonal conflict is often described as a pervasive and inevitable phenomenon in all human endeavours, a wealth of evidence has revealed that the way people deal with interpersonal conflict is largely shaped by broader cultural orientation (Chen et al., 2018). Broadly, culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group from another (Hofstede, 1991). Prior studies on cross-cultural conflict management research have revealed the extent to which national values shape conflict management practices in organisational settings (Zhang et al., 2017). National

culture often comprises common language, beliefs, religion, racial identity, behaviour, and tradition shared by the population of a sovereign country (Steenkamp, 2001). There is a high presumption that the underlying characteristics of national culture have the potential to model social interactions in the workplace of any society (Gahan and Abeysekera, 2009). As such, national culture can be so ingrained among people that it shapes every sphere of conflict-handling practices (Kim-Jo et al., 2010). This observation serves as the context and impetus for the present article.

This study focuses on exploring how national value inform conflict management practices among Nigerian university heads of department. It worth noting that national culture, which a person often acquires from childhood, is more deeply rooted in the human mind than organisational culture that shape a job role or what is perceived as how things are done within an organisational environment (Ma et al., 2010). What we know about the interface between context and conflict resolution comes from western societies (Hann et al., 2016), while there is a paucity of similar studies on developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, where cultural orientations differ from the West. There are also cross-cultural studies (comparing western and Asian countries) on how context shapes conflict-handling strategies. Examples of these studies include cultural conflict management variations between Americans and Chinese people (e.g. Doucet et al., 2009) and comparisons between the US and Mexico (Gomez and Taylor, 2018). Research investigating the values and beliefs shaping preferential strategies in other non-western contexts, such as Nigeria, is scarce.

Remarkably, conflict resolution strategies differ significantly between national cultures. For instance, cross-cultural studies have frequently found individualistic Anglo-American cultures show more overt and competitive conflict management modes while those in Confucian Asian collectivists (e.g. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan), prefer to adopt harmonious and compromising styles (Morris and Fu, 2001). Cross-cultural studies have consistently adopted a restrictive approach by heavily relying on the individualistic-collectivistic construct in distinguishing conflict handling methods. This construct, however, represents only one concept out of the fourfold value orientations of Hofstede's landmark theory that conceptualises the different and unique dimensions in which culture varies. Given the multiplicities and complexities of cultural dynamics, the present study has taken a more nuanced approach by considering the other cultural typologies beyond the individualistic/collectivistic dichotomy (Hofstede's insights) by explaining how culture influences a negotiator's diverse judgements in conflict handling, with the objective of extending the extant knowledge in this area. Despite the level of progress made in research findings that illustrate the extent to which context informs conflict resolution using the distinct individualistic/collectivistic concepts, there are many unanswered questions concerning the choice of only one aspect of Hofstede's efforts to simplify the complex nature of cultural orientations in different contexts. In broadening academic discussions in this regard, the aim of this study is to expand the theory by exploring a Sub-Saharan African region where studies are hard to find.

In addition, researchers have increasingly adopted quantitative methodologies to examine the nexus between culture and conflict management constructs (e.g. Saiti, 2015; Gomez and Taylor, 2018). While this method generates statistical analysis that makes findings generalizable, there is a need for qualitative studies that give readers an opportunity to discover rich in-depth narratives (Saunders et al., 2012). Critics argue that Hofstede's

adoption of a survey design may not be an accurate methodology for determining and measuring cultural studies particularly when the variables being examined are culturally sensitive and highly subjective (Morris et al., 2001; Chairsrakeo and Speece, 2004). Furthermore, the paucity of extant research on the impact of national culture on conflict management practices in a Sub-Saharan African context may suggest empirical testing with pre-conceived hypotheses may be premature in the exploration of taken-for-granted assumptions of lived experiences. Therefore, this qualitative study uses Nigerian cultural characteristics and focuses on the interpersonal conflict-handling methods of university heads of department. Nigeria is known as one the most populous black West African countries, with an estimated population of over 200 million people, with 250 ethnic groups (Worldometrics, 2020). The Nigerian culture is marked by higher collectivistic traditions (Chukwu and Eluko, 2013). As such, there are strong ties towards social groups and mandatory obligations to use closer interpersonal space than individualistic nations, such as the US and the UK, where autonomy, privacy, and self-projections are highly prioritised (Jackson, 2004). The institutionalisation of gender dominance also exists in Nigeria, which has been identified as a less egalitarian and patriarchal society, where men are socialised to become breadwinners and the women are primarily expected to engage in childcare and other domestic activities (Mordi et al., 2013). Other daily normative features of the Nigerian culture includes high respect for the elderly; diverse religious beliefs; acceptance of gender inequality and status differentials, particularly in organisational settings (Ituma et al., 2011). These cultural values are often perceived as framing interpersonal relations and behaviours in Nigeria (Akanji, 2020).

Sadly, Nigeria is also plagued with various problems arising from political instability, a high degree of corruption, economic instability, and weak governance (Mordi et al., 2013). Despite these socioeconomic challenges, there has always been a strong emphasis on educational attainment in Nigeria (Ituma et al., 2011). The development of the university system in Nigeria emerged from the introduction of western education (Garba, 2012). This brought to the nation (especially after 1960's independence) bright opportunities for Nigerians to earn the requisite university education for labour market entry, both locally and internationally (Iruonagbe et al., 2015). A university system constitutes the highest citadel of learning in any country. Spratlen (1995) emphasises that interpersonal conflicts, which are often an inevitable element of personal relationships, are bound to occur among categories of stakeholders within the university community. As a result, it is suggested that proactive leadership styles in higher education institutions are required in order to shape constructive conflict-handling approaches (Akanji et al., 2019).

One such prominent university leadership position is that of the head of department or departmental chair (Stanley and Algert, 2007). Mathias (2006, p. 65) pointed out that 'the head of department occupies a key institutional position yet the role is a complex and demanding one which is subject to pressures, conflicts and uncertainties'. There are few studies that scrutinise the landscape of higher education and focus on the leadership abilities of departmental heads in order to manage interpersonal conflicts in western university workspaces (Lumpkin, 2004; Mathias, 2006; Stanley and Algert, 2007). Similar studies from a non-western perspective are rare. Interpersonal conflicts that occur in organisational settings refer to disagreements among individuals arising from divergence of interests and concerns in working relationships (Baillien et al., 2017). As such, a study of this nature can enlighten knowledge-seeking academics and HR practitioners on contextual differences in

conflict-handling protocols of an under-researched country outside the West. Drawing on the various facets of Hofstede's culture model, this study specifically addresses the following research question: how does national cultural orientation shape the conflict management styles adopted by university heads of department when addressing interpersonal conflicts?

Theoretical framework of study

Geert Hofstede made a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on the impact of national culture on values of those living and working in various societies. His landmark study emerged from his large-scale research of employees at IBM Corporation located in forty different countries (Mullins and Christy, 2013). Hofstede's initial line of inquiry distinguished one national culture from another according to four typologies – social, power, uncertainty, and gender orientations (Hofstede, 1980). Each of these orientations were found to influence the attitudes, behaviours, values, and belief systems of people who lived in the society under study (Hofstede, 2001). Explaining the fourfold typology in more detail, Hofstede argued that differences in social orientation are the extent to which a given culture is either collectivistic or individualistic. In individualistic cultures, the inherent desire for the supremacy of personal goals and self-projections takes priority over concerns for a larger group. On the contrary, the need for social relationships takes precedence in collectivistic societies. Furthermore, Hofstede identified power in terms of power distance (PD) conceptualised as the extent to which a culture accepts and endorses the uneven distribution of power and status privileges among members. Nations with high PD tend to expect unquestionable obedience and submission towards superiors with acclaimed status and authority. In lower PD countries, people expect and accept power relations that are more consultative in nature and recognise equality of rights.

Uncertainty avoidance (UC) is a dimension that describes the extent to which people in a society are not at ease with ambiguity and uncertainty in realities confronting them. For instance, societies with strong UC rely highly on formalised policies and procedures in order to alleviate unforeseeable circumstances while those low of UC depend on informal norms and beliefs for most matters (Wekhian, 2015). The gender dimension refers to the distribution of values based on gender perceptions in any given culture. According to Hofstede (2001, p. 297), 'masculinity stands for a society in which social gender roles are clearly distinct – men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life'.

These cultural typologies comprise values that include tendencies to prefer certain end states to others (Gardner and Barcella, 2016). Values are perceived as customary and are known as the essential roots influencing social behaviour (Bulley et al., 2017). As such, national culture or context-specific traditions at a national level potently shape both a negotiator's interests and priorities, which are often displayed in the preferred or adopted conflict resolution strategy (Neuliep and Johnson, 2016). By comparing and contrasting cultures conceptualised by the 'Hofstedian' approach, prior research has utilised the traditional two-dimensional model's five styles (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974) to analyse the types of cultural orientations that people exhibit during dispute resolution. The model is dependent on two dimensions of either the conflict handler prioritises – assertive behaviours out of concerns to project 'self-image' or displays of 'cooperativeness' out of concern for others when addressing conflict situations. Consequently, these two dimensions are used to define the five typologies of

specific conflict-handling methods, namely: (1) competing, (2) accommodating, (3) collaborating, (4) compromising, and (5) avoiding dispositions.

‘Competing’ as a style is characterised by showcasing a domineering attitude channelled towards achieving a ‘win-lose’ situation because the individual is more focused on their own interest at the expense of the interests of others. This approach is described as assertive and uncooperative. On the contrary, an ‘accommodating’ style is regarded as unassertive and cooperative. An individual relegates personal interest and yields to the concerns of others. ‘Collaborating’ is recognised as both assertive and cooperative because it involves attempts to work with others to reach a win-win situation. ‘Compromising’ is categorised as moderating concerns for both self and others. It requires both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The aim is to proffer concessions when resolving disagreements between parties. ‘Avoiding’ is considered unassertive and uncooperative, since it might take the form of delaying resolution, sidestepping problems, or postponing conflict settlement to a later time. One of the most frequently examined areas in relation to national cultural differences relates to how value differences impact the preferred conflict resolution modes using these fivefold styles as a further explanatory model (Hofstede, 1980). For instance, it has been found that Asians value social ties, making them endorse subtle accommodating approaches when handling conflicts, unlike Americans who are considered ardent problem-solvers and adopt a more competitive stance when managing conflicts (Gomez and Taylor, 2018).

Drawing on the foregoing cultural distinction, which leads to preferences concerning different methods of dispute resolution, there is a sizeable number of literature that predominately focuses on the individualistic/collectivistic dimension to explore contrasting conflict management styles between western regions and Asian countries, neglecting those of other cultures. Given the paucity of research from an African context, this article aims to explore what has already been highlighted as the Nigerian cultural characteristics as an alternative study to occidental views on dispute resolution. This study is focused on informing a wider academic audience on how those values in a non-western context frame conflict management practices. In addressing this gap, the article applies the cultural dimensions theory of Hofstede to the phenomenon under study, which is yet to be adequately understood and explained theoretically from the Nigerian context. Rather than simply rehearsing the existing debates on individualistic and collectivistic distinctions, the study makes a critical engagement with the different typologies of Hofstede’s cultural facets, subject to the specific research question that this article seeks to address.

Methodology

A qualitative design was adopted for the study’s data collection and analysis. This naturalistic method means ‘any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 17). A qualitative approach was considered most suitable for the study because it is an appropriate means of gaining an in-depth understanding of hitherto, an under-researched phenomena (Cresswell, 2008). Broadly, it involves an interactive process between literature and evidence, which helps to understand reality across a wider range of taken-for-granted assumptions about lived experiences (Saunders et al., 2012). Moreover, the paucity of research on the interface between culture and conflict management in the Nigerian context suggests that testing with pre-conceived hypotheses may be premature. Epistemologically,

the study draws on a social constructivist tradition, with an emphasis on discovering rich contextual data from people's narratives (Bryman, 2012). Taking this perspective, social reality is portrayed as an 'on-going and dynamic process, constantly reproduced by people acting upon their representation of it' (Fernando, 2012, p. 467). The rationale for this methodological stance is that it provides an appropriate framework for the development of an in-depth understanding of a researched topic of interest. Based on the subjective judgement of the researchers, a non-probabilistic purposive sampling method was used to recruit thirty-six participants from three Nigerian universities.

In compliance with ethical considerations, formal permission was granted by those in charge of research protocols after the study met the requirements and administrative approval of each of the institution's standards for research on human subjects. The anonymity of the participants and selected universities was preserved as one of the conditions that had to be met before we received such approval. In order to fulfil our promise of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to represent each head of department (HOD). They were labelled HOD 1, HOD 2, HOD 3, etc. for the purposes of our study. Due to the very busy nature of the offices of some of the HODs, we had to relocate to quiet study rooms within the university premises in order to minimise distractions and safeguard the voice recordings (Saunders et al., 2012).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with HODs of twenty-six males and ten females (all with a status of senior lecturer and above) in different academic faculties. Since our participants and study researchers are Nigerians with similar shared cultural backgrounds, this helped to alleviate any reticence felt and encouraged all participants to fully engage in the interview sessions. Participants (aged 45 to 75) were solicited through a combination of using existing contacts, referrals, and a snowballing process. Participants were considered eligible because they held the position of HOD and had a minimum of ten years of work experience in the academic field. The individual semi-structured interviews lasted for about 45-65 minutes and were all conducted on site. The data collection lasted for close to four months. The principles of informed consent and voluntary participation were highly prioritised.

For instance, consent forms were presented to the participants at the start of each interview, and all interviewees were adequately informed about the purpose of the research, while the approach of using open-ended questions in the interview gave room for flexibility in discussions. The semi-structured interviews allowed for a pursuit of an in-depth understanding of cultural perspective and conflict management. We asked each HOD a series of open-ended questions framed around the main point of our inquiry. Representative of the questions asked were: Making references to our broad national culture, how would you, as HOD, traditionally describe your conflict management style? From the perspective of our societal values, do you feel that the relative importance of your position as the head of department or the interests of the conflicting parties dominate your conflict-handling style and why? As the HOD, do you feel you need to have a perfect answer when addressing interpersonal conflicts among your faculty members and why? Do you feel your gender shapes your conflict management style?

Concerning the credibility and reliability of the study, we chose to use iterative questioning – asking probing questions. The objective of this approach was to elicit credible data as the

researchers constantly returned to issues previously raised by the study participants in order to verify their claims by rephrasing questions with the sole aim of eliminating biases. During the interview process, we observed that three of the participants could not initially relate their management style to cultural connotations, which constitutes the main aim of the study. To solve this problem, we focussed on engaging in a ‘constructed dialogue’ approach (Patton, 1990) by highlighting hypothetical scenarios to which interviewees could relate and by asking how they would traditionally resolve the matter if they had been confronted with such situations. The approach engaged both we, the researchers, and interviewees in a process that brought to remembrance lived experiences and vivid narratives from participants (Pessoa et al., 2019). As researchers, our epistemological assumptions was influenced by a social constructivist approach which makes it important to reflexively acknowledge our own positionalities when interpreting the lived experiences of our research subjects (Shaw et al., 2019). Thus, the choice of an interactive style of eliciting answers from interviewees was informed by the national and professional identities of all researchers who are academics that have served in some leadership capacity in their respective universities.

Given that some aspect of positionality are culturally ascribed or generally regarded as being fixed such as nationality, gender and race (Cho and Yi, 2019), the researchers’ shared cultural, social, and linguistic background with those of the research participants gave us ‘lived familiarity’ with, and a prior knowledge of some cultural traits and value orientations shaping conflict resolution behaviours of participants. It made it easy for us to secure more honest answers and capture all relevant data during transcription since we were conversant with terminologies that are meaningful to and from the perspective of participants within the culture whose beliefs and behaviours are being studied (Gary and Holmes, 2020).

Prior to data collection, our perceptions as male academics who have held leadership positions such as module leaders, head of academic planning unit and chair, staff disciplinary committee are that male academics in managerial positions are more likely to demonstrate overt and assertive conflict handling behaviours than female lecturers who are often expected to be tender and more intuitively inspired to show care and affection to others when handling conflicts. Interestingly, our study findings which is reported later in more detail revealed how female participants of our study explicitly claim to display dogmatic characteristics usually associated with men when resolving conflict situations. These accounts made us better informed of Nigeria’s cultural propagation of gender role differentiations that creates an intensification of efforts by female professionals to overcome gender stereotypes firmly ingrained in the heavily patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society (Akanji et al., 2020). Thus, we became sympathetic to how women living in an unequalitarian society become more resolute to manage workplace conflict regardless of perceived gender role limitations (Adisa et al., 2019).

In addition, frequent debriefing sessions were held among researchers in order to ensure all the interview protocols had been completely covered and observed so that the collected data would be reliable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). With formal permission from participants, all the interviews were audio-recorded. All the questions asked (see samples earlier described), captured the fourfold dimensions of Hofstede’s theory as we rigorously explored the study’s main research question. Our interview sessions continued until saturation point which is a stage when no new information is discovered during the data collection process, and further data collection was unlikely to reveal new insights (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). After thirty-

six individual interviews, we perceived that data collection may cease and proceed to analysis of all material data.

Data analysis

We began the data analysis by transcribing voice recordings. Before the data analysis, the transcribed interviews were returned to the participants for ‘member checking’ in order to confirm the accuracy all related data. Member checking is often mentioned as a validation method for judging good qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016). After we had confirmed all the material data, we undertook a thematic analysis procedure (TAP) due to its flexible yet grounded approach. TAP is an inductive method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data and allowing researchers to use a research question as a starting point for identifying themes that can shed light on the area of interest (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TAP involved an analytical process through which the transcribed interviews were fractured and subsequently integrated to form conceptual themes grounded in the data. Following the data collection process, iterative thematic coding was carried out in stages. We began with a first cycle of coding, which involved identifying the Nigerian cultural characteristics constructed from participants’ narratives which became the first step in organising our data about how values shape conflict management. We assigned a word or short phrase that symbolically described these cultural attributes.

Further consideration of the transcriptions thereafter generated second-order codes that presented culturally inclined conflict-handling protocols based on participants’ claims. Finally, both categories of codes generated from the first- and second-order coding systems were consolidated given the underlying cognate ideas they represent and were appropriately amalgamated to form conceptual themes in a bid to generate theoretical explanations of the phenomenon under study, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Illustrative quotes	First-order codes (Nigerian characteristics)	Second-order codes (traditional conflict management approaches)	Main themes (i.e. Concepts emerging from cognate codes)
<p>“As an Associate Professor, I display value traits that asserts authority with some level of fatherly benevolence when dealing with conflicting parties. I care about people having good working relationships but also demand everyone to comply with my directives on issues that are strictly within my prerogative to settle masterfully [...] I believe we men have more self-asserting behaviours to control conflict than females in this part of the world” (HOD 1).</p> <p>“Traditionally, I am stern when handling conflicts given my position as the HOD [...] I feel no obligation to resolve every single interpersonal issue because of the enormous responsibilities on my shoulders. However, when such matters disturbs me, I scold erring parties as a father corrects his children and in return expect absolute obedience from all, regardless of gender since our society demands absolute respect for elders and superiors at work” (HOD 2).</p>	Paternalistic, status-accruing, patriarchal, elderly regard, values social hierarchy	Defined power relations, authoritative handling, resolving issues through control and care, assertive and uncooperative style	Status-based dictates
<p>“In as much as I feel my role as the HOD demands respect, maintaining peace among departmental members is my main goal [...] my conflict handling approach is often geared towards preserving cordial relationships since we relate with ourselves like family. When I’m settling personality conflicts among lecturers, I tend to formalise</p>	Prioritises family ties, relationships prevails, respecting in-	Reinforcing social relations, making concessions, a give-and-take	Normative emphasis on communality

<p>shared positions between parties. One party cannot be 100% right without considerations to others in accordance to our wider traditions...” (HOD 3).</p> <p>“Although I’m the head, I often adopt a give-and-take approach in an attempt to satisfy interest of disputants. Our societal culture demands preserving social ties by settling quarrels amicably especially when an older woman like me intervenes using my wealth of wisdom and experience” (HOD 4).</p>	group relations	approach, assertive and cooperative style	
<p>“I don’t claim to have all the right answers to conflicts [...] this is why as a tradition, I pray and ask God to give me the wisdom to deal with difficult disagreements that can potentially threaten the peace of my department [...] I’m less formal and take a relativistic stance to preserve relative harmony of the department even if conflicting parties are not completely satisfied” (HOD 5).</p> <p>“I may not necessarily have perfect answers that suits opposing parties to a conflict, but my faith in God provides some sorts of relief from anxiety of making wrong decisions. When confronted with interpersonal conflicts, I’m initially inert but use the opportunity to teach parties moral lessons about how to live in peace and congruity in line with our cultural values that propagates social cohesion...” (HOD 6).</p>	Religious observance, esteeming moral values,	Religious inclination, less formalisation, passive approach, non-confrontational	Religious motivation
<p>“Yes it does because as a woman and mother, I have a more tender and soft disposition to conflict management in general, but when handling difficult ones especially when men are involved, I become stricter [...] since men sometimes need firmness to listen to a woman. I energetically display a high level of emphatic and compelling stance for parties to allow sleeping dogs lie and embrace placidity because our societal culture esteems cordial social relationships...” (HOD 7).</p> <p>“...although I’m a women, I disapprove of interpersonal conflicts that slows work down [...] So like a man, I use my position to settle quarrels by dominating conversations and advising parties that conflict is part of life but being civil about it is what matters [...] I expect everyone to maintain a servile attitude for the collective interests of my department” (HOD 8).</p>	Androgynous tradition, gender differentiation, values servility	Domineering style, projecting assertiveness, displaying mannish behaviours, controlling	Masculine hegemony

Table 1: Qualitative findings, 2020.

In this final stage, a process of cross-comparison and modification in the overall coding process continued until a consensus was reached by all researchers on what should constitute the main themes of the study. As such, we considered the labelling of the codes that represent the themes to be accurate and reflective of the meanings that the participants expressed about their conflict management styles and the cultural reasons for adopting such styles.

Results and discussion

In presenting the findings, illustrative quotations from participants (see Table 1) are used to explain emerging themes from our data analysis. The foregoing quotations, as the primary source of evidence, are written verbatim to aid in ‘storytelling’, which provides readers with findings reflecting the participants’ experiences and contexts (Cresswell, 2008). In-depth analyses of each thematic area are given below.

Status-based dictates

Based on our findings shown in Table 1, some HODs explained that they operate from a position of power, rank, and a superior age since elders are respected in Nigeria, which makes their conflict management style appear paternalistic in nature. Paternalism is conceptualised as a portrayal of self-interest and good will (Aycan, 2006). Reflecting on participants’ job

position as the interviews progressed, the researchers, who are all Nigerians and share a similar social identity to the Nigerian HODs, could relate to the participants' cultural views. We are aware of how workplace superiors often hold a position of paternal (or maternal) responsibility concerning their subordinates, who remain loyal to their superiors if they feel their bosses treat them fairly or fulfil their obligations, as is expected in a reciprocal arrangement (Pellegrini et al., 2010). Consequently, we became interested in understanding how paternal values shape conflict management modes. Thus, the participants' accounts demonstrate their preference for conflict-handling methods that combine a strong use of authority and a benevolent disposition. This cultural inclination explains the tendency of senior academics holding leadership positions (such as HODs) to show elements of control when handling interpersonal conflicts among members of staff under their leadership. They claimed to demonstrate self-asserting behaviours when managing conflicts, which bears some resemblance to a competing style. The following quotations typify participants' shared views suggesting how paternalistic relations, through their emphasis on power differentials, shape conflict management practices:

I really don't entertain unsolicited discretion [...] compliance has to be 100% my way, and when anyone deviates from the established protocols, leading to a sharp arguments among faculty members, I often remind everyone that I am older and the 'boss' here [...] In dealing with departmental misunderstandings, my caring disposition to stop disagreements at all costs should be respected, obliterating conflicts among subordinates. (HOD 9)

You know how our society places extreme value on eldership [...] So, I resolve conflicts as an elder and expect total obedience from my subordinates regardless of the fact that I'm a woman, I will always stand my ground. I am decisive when resolving conflicts, because it affirms my control and care for all – even if they don't see it that way. This approach is necessary for making speedy decisions. (HOD 10)

The preceding excerpts show that the adoption of a paternalistic conflict-handling style necessitates the use of defined power relations based on position and status. In Nigeria, paternalism is a type of attitude and behaviour based on patriarchy, which represents an ideological construct that considers men to be superior to women (Adisa et al., 2019). Expressions of dominance outlined in Table 1 by some male participants (e.g. 'I believe we men have more self-asserting behaviours to control conflict than females...') and perceptions of control ('...in return, I expect absolute obedience from all, regardless of gender, since our society demands absolute respect for elders and superiors at work') illustrate the characteristics of a patriarchal society. Interestingly, HOD 10 claims to demonstrate paternalistic behaviours (possibly in combating gender prejudices) by asserting a dominating resolution style based on eldership rights. Notably, Nigerians are generally class conscious, which explains why Nigerian people hold certain societal 'titles' in high regard (e.g. eldership, headship) and why those holding such titles emphasise the need to address them appropriately (Okeke, 2017). It gives them a feeling of respect and superiority over others, especially when handling conflicts between juniors.

The most influential theoretical explanation of this culturally inclined conflict resolution choice draws on Hofstede's dimensional analysis, which distinguishes how value orientations operate differently in national cultures. For instance, Nigeria is rated high in PD, with a score of 80% (Hofstede, 1980). Nigerians are known to accept the authority of managers (traditionally recognised and called 'bosses') as a mark of respect, honour, and servile

disposition (Aluko, 2003). For this reason, our study suggests the use of benevolence in managing interpersonal conflicts emanates from this thriving culture, which reveals claims of the willingness of subordinates (or ‘subjects’) in workplace relations to serve and please their superiors (Akanji et al., 2020). From this perspective, so much attention is drawn to ‘self-image’ as a leader. In practice, cross-management literature recognises paternalism as a flourishing tradition in developing economies of Asia and Africa (Chen and Kao, 2009; Jackson, 2016). While Hofstede’s findings provides valuable insights into the degree to which respect and acceptance of power relations varies, our findings clarifies why the unequal distribution of position and power is tolerated in some non-western contexts. In bringing more reflections on Hofstede’s legacy, our study underscores paternalism as being viewed positively based on the acceptability of high power distance in Nigeria.

A similar national culture of paternalism also exists in East Asian settings, such as Japanese and Chinese organisations, where moral attachment and deference to those with higher ranks shape conflict resolution dynamics (Morris and Fu, 2001). However, these conflict-handling practices have been perceived negatively in western contexts, where individualistic and egalitarian values are more pronounced (Gomez and Taylor, 2018). In western cultures (e.g. the UK and the US), people view interactions within corporate and social groups as occurring between self-independent individuals, and as a result, conflicts, arguments, and disagreements are accepted as natural aspects of social and organisational life (Posthuma et al., 2006). Hence, western democracies are perceived as political systems that regulate conflicts between competing interests while individuals are socialised to stand up for their rights in conflict situations with superior bodies (Gardner and Barcella, 2016). Additionally, Aycan (2006) argued that the benevolent features of paternalism have been difficult for western scholars to comprehend.

Martinez (2005) further raised concerns about the predominant use of control and care as signs of paternalistic dispositions make it difficult for westerners to digest. Jackson (2016) reiterates that a leader’s care and protective inclinations may be perceived as a violation of privacy in individualistic societies, where people focus on self-interest and self-acclaimed behaviours. Thus, there is a sizeable literature on general differences in conflict management styles between national cultures based on contrasting values (Doucet et al., 2009). According to Gomez and Taylor (2018, p. 36), “a value is a tendency to prefer certain end-states over others because these end-states are personally or socially preferable”. As such, an important line of inquiry of our study suggests that conflict resolutions behaviours are firmly framed by cultural values that translates to attitudes about appropriate behaviours accepted in a society and rejected in another (Kim-Jo et al., 2010).

Normative emphasis on concessions

Further evidence revealed traces from some participants who claim to use a traditional compromising style in managing interpersonal conflicts. They described being formal and keeping to protocols in an attempt to satisfy each party’s concern by creating shared positions. Inferences of cultural propensities are placed on the need to promote mutual obligations by ‘shared positions’ and a ‘give-and-take approach’ (see illustrative quotes in Table 1), influencing their emphasis on compromises being made. This approach is drawn from a societal tradition that promotes the tenets of mutual obligation. In contrast to greater individuality of the West, the Nigerian culture is recognised as advocating harmony and

cooperation within groups. Hofstede argues that the cultural characteristics of this nature (i.e. collectivism) emphasise that the interests of the group take precedence over the interests of individuals. Our findings suggest that the leader-member exchange in revolving matters is premised on a formal obligation to accept concessions that arise from values that prioritise tolerance, as shown in the excerpts below.

The relative interests of the conflicting parties dominate my conflict-handling style. I prefer to settle issues between departmental colleagues in such a way that everyone learns to tolerate one another as a family, in compliance with our societal conventions, which places importance on preserving relationships and social integration. (HOD 11)

I use a reconciliatory method when resolving interpersonal conflicts among my departmental staff. Since we have been socialised to build strong affiliations that extend beyond the workplace to other non-work related domains, I call parties together to settle issues amicably [...] I make everyone aware that it is good that we live in harmony as fellow brothers and sisters in the workplace. (HOD 12)

The sampled views indicate behavioural patterns fostering communality shape the chosen conflict-handling method. The quotations show that the need to maintain social harmony and foster interpersonal relationships significantly impacts how these HODs resolve verbal misunderstandings in Nigerian universities. In this context, a major part of the social fabric of Nigeria is its collectivist culture, according to which individuals develop social ties and a mutual obligation to support the aspirations of others (Hofstede, 2001). These actions are intended to restore cordial relations, especially when elders are involved, leading to a preference for a concessionary style expected of a culture that values interdependence (Ma et al., 2010). Nigerians are known to have a fervent respect for authority and a strong desire to build integrated relationships that also include non-work-related social exchanges with their leaders (Ituma et al., 2011). This is in contrast with the western context, where a substantial amount of international research has accumulated with findings reflecting Americans' preference for a separation between work and private life affairs (Cai and Fink, 2002). Furthermore, there is evidence that organisational relationships are predominantly based on work contracts (Gomez and Taylor, 2018). On the contrary, Nigerians, as collectivists, seek to define themselves as members of a social group. They perceive both work and private life matters are embedded, offering a potential explanation as to why some choose a conflict-handling style that is non-confrontational and fostering harmonious relationships, as expressed by HOD 11 and HOD 12.

Religious motivations

The remarkable narratives from the participants that compose this theme (see Table 1) suggest dimensions of religiosity, from claims such as '...this is why, as an ingrained tradition, I pray...' '...but my faith in God...'), play an important role in the 'relief of anxiety' associated with the uncertainty of settling conflicts satisfactorily. Hofstede argued that cultural dimensions of this nature demonstrate the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by unknown circumstances and have created definite rules or institutionalised policies in trying to avoid these situations. In exploring the extent of tolerance towards ambiguity in this context, six participants confirmed that their religious beliefs have a profound motivation on their conflict management practices. As evidenced in Table 1, this trend underlines the greater acceptance of using religious grounds to justify practices that are presumed as a cultural proclivity to find understanding and some level of assurance that they

are making the right conflict-handling decisions. Here, our findings suggest that faith in spiritual powers (i.e. divine providence) functions as a relief from such uncertainties (Kogan et al., 2013).

Given the informal nature of the approach imbibed in this context (i.e. ‘religious observance’), research conceptualise Nigerians as having an intermediate score, which does not show a clear preference for well-defined policies, written regulatory guidelines and cravings for predictability to life’s answers found in some cultures in the West (Hofstede et al., 2010). For instance, in countries like France, Germany, and Spain, where citizens are very avoidant of uncertainty, it has been found that they are intolerant of ambiguity, which results in them placing high value on institutionalised policies, government legislation, written schedules, and clear answers to problematic human endeavours (Mullins and Christy, 2013). Countries with high uncertainty avoidance maintain formal protocols and are intolerant of orthodox behaviours and ideas (Hofstede, 2001). As such, further evidence on informality in our study exposed the adoption of avoidance strategies when handling conflicts, as Nigerian culture highlights the propagation of moral values and reciprocal obligatory traditions to member groups (Mordi et al., 2013). HOD 13 narrates:

I don’t claim to be all-knowing, so the way I resolve interpersonal conflicts as the head [of department] is by drawing on my faith as a Muslim. I don’t allow parties to narrate the root causes of their disagreements, which can result in more heated arguments, especially between academics [...] I sometimes delay settlement [of a conflict] to calm frail nerves and admonish parties to shun feelings of resentment. Since Islam is a religion of peace, I preach peace to warring individuals and remind them of its importance for our collective good.

Similarly, HOD 14 claims:

...when resolving interpersonal conflicts brought to my attention as the head [of department], I often ask for divine direction, as a Christian, to sort out the really [difficult] ones. I also allow angry parties to cool down and make them aware that conflicts are inescapable in any social organisation. I advocate adherence to our values of maintaining strong human relations, which includes doing good to others, respecting elders, and showing virtues of forgiveness in line with our respective religious beliefs.

The foregoing context-based views show preferences for avoidance when managing conflicts based on religious proclivity. It signifies how a culture identified as collectivist deals with uncertainties surrounding conflict resolution by engaging in some form of passive communication, such as avoidance tactics, in a bid to enforce interpersonal harmony (Meng et al., 2018). The strategy involves behaviour such as sidestepping or delaying conflict interventions. As shown above in the comments of HOD 13, it is argued that avoidance becomes evident when a negotiator is trying to buy time and give angry parties an opportunity to ‘calm down’ to reduce tension (Ohbuchi and Atsumi, 2010). Furthermore, studies on conflict management that deal with comparative cultural contexts found that collectivists, in some cases, tend to choose avoidance tactics over confrontational methods (i.e. a competing and proactive stance) that has popularly been identified with individualistic cultures (Wekhian, 2015).

From our findings, religion (either Christianity or Islam in this context) is considered a determining factor for the choice of avoidance. According to Haynes (2009, p. 52), ‘religion has a strong – perhaps growing – significance as a key source of identity for millions of

people, especially in the developing world' such as Nigeria. It shapes every aspect of national life, including, politics, government, economics, education, law, and social dealings. While religion constitutes an essential part of culture (Azim, 2017), little is known about the interface between religiosity and conflict-handling choices. The present study has clearly found that in societies like Nigeria, where interdependent values significantly impact people's way of life, religious beliefs offer a prominent medium for minimising strife and social misunderstandings by choosing conflict management styles that can lead to peace and tolerance – regardless of any specific religion or religious background. Our findings resonate with a prior study of Rasmi et al. (2014), where it was found that Arab immigrants to Canada who are identified as collectivists and believed to be a very religious sect preferred the accommodating, compromising, and avoiding styles when dealing with conflicts within their families. It was notably reported that adults in this community oblige their parents in conflict situations as a sign of respect and concern for maintaining relational congruence. Significantly, our findings on religious motivations further strengthens the importance for the use of a qualitative paradigm in discovering the richness of context on how conflict management behaviours are shaped by cultural instincts. Hofstede's dimensional concept have faced heavy criticism based on the sole quantification of differences between national cultures which promotes a largely static view of culture and thereby ignoring potential influences of a variety of other contextual factors which are intricately emic to traditional values in some non-western countries (Williamson, 2002) such as religious observance in Nigeria.

Masculine hegemony

Interestingly, almost all the female participants identified with some characteristics often associated with men, such as assertive, competitive, and domineering behaviours, when handling conflicts – despite claims of having caring and motherly dispositions (see Table 1). The widespread cultural values indicate a historically rooted, ideologically admitted, and psychologically internalised state of male domination in Nigeria (Adisa et al., 2019). Such systemic and generalised beliefs about gender dominance have been found to inform conflict management instincts, which originate from societal norms framed by gender differentiation and the need to combat gender stereotypes associated with them. Apart from the quotations presented in Table 1, additional samples evidence these findings:

I don't let being a woman downplay my ability to manage verbal crises among the academic and non-teaching staff members in my department. I boldly demonstrate conflict-handling expertise and aggressively show my capability to control rancour from escalating [...] I purposefully do this to dislodge cultural ideas that female academics in positions of leadership are feeble in managing misunderstandings like their male counterparts (HOD 15).

As a female HOD, I am hesitant at times to display characteristics associated with women such as emotionality and sensitivity to conflicting parties [...] I don't want to take the chance of being considered a weak head [of department], necessitating my adoption of a dogmatic approach in settling departmental conflicts – just like how a Nigerian man will always want to preside over the affairs of his own home (HOD 16).

The results here evidence how the ability to control conflicts is allocated largely on the basis of a culture that systematically reinforces and legitimises the deeply embedded values of social male dominance and servility, shaping women's behaviours in attempts to manage gender biases (Adisa et al., 2020). Given the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society that

frames organisational life in our study context, there were expressions of the existence of gender role differences in terms of the ability to manage interpersonal conflicts and of scepticism about women's capability to adopt managerial abilities that are often associated with male rather than female attributes (described as 'feeble' and 'weak' in our data). Research evidence that strongly suggests women demonstrate more androgynous values in order to overcome perceptions that good leaders are male and masculine, especially in cultures where distinct gender role expectations are prevalent across all domains of work and life, supports these findings (Kim et al., 2020). Thus, prior studies have found that extreme patriarchy breeds gender stereotyping, which is more severe in South Asia and Africa, contrary to the attention given to equal opportunities in many western countries (Adya, 2008).

Conclusion and implications of the study

Conclusion

Drawing on Hofstede's famous four-dimensional model of national culture, this article set out to explore the extent to which national culture informs conflict management styles in an African country. Situated in a national context (Nigeria) that has been neglected in favour of western-based research, the study focused on contextual milieus that shape the conflict-handling preferences of departmental heads in selected universities. Since conflict management is a culturally defined phenomenon, it is perceived that conflict handling differs across cultures (Kim-Jo et al., 2010). Therefore, international conflict management research focused on evidence from the global south is thus necessary in order to provide more research information on conflict management behaviours that informs a wider audience (Neuliep and Johnson, 2016). Furthermore, studying conflict resolutions from other cultures other than western samples can also challenge, refine, and enrich our understanding of conflict management in different working environments. As such, our study has important theoretical implications.

Theoretical implications

As a theoretical contribution, we applied Hofstede's culture theory in understanding how culture influences conflict management. More importantly, we extended our understanding of the theory by using it to systematise and explain empirical data and make sense of the phenomenon under study. Rather than merely repeating existing discourse and leveraging on only the individualistic/collectivistic dimensions (which represents only a single strand of Hofstede's insights) to explore conflict-handling strategies, this study utilised the fourfold typology, namely: power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. Even though the fourfold typology is a simplification approach to the great complexity of cultures and its possible dimensions, we believe that it was fruitful as a point of departure from previous studies for a more intricate discussion and analysis of the values and traditions that characterise Nigeria's cultural system, which is believed to influence social interactions and conflict management.

Our study highlights the theoretical importance of context and demonstrates how the elaborate application of the cultural typology enables us to better appreciate and explain the phenomenon compared to how we would have done before (Byron and Thatcther, 2016). For instance, it has been frequently documented that western individualistic cultures, such as the

US and the UK, adopt assertive, direct, and confrontational approaches associated with competing and dominating modes of handling conflicts, as they seek to emphasise personal outcomes over relationships and value the need for assertiveness (Gomez and Taylor, 2018). This position is at odds with that of the collectivists, generally identified as users of indirect and less confrontational styles, since value is placed on harmonious outcomes (Gardner and Barcella, 2016).

While our findings confirm the already established cultural conditions of collectivism in the literature, as evidenced in detail from our data, further evidence from our study that captures a contextual theme – status-based dictates – conceptualises how some HODs’ styles are culturally constructed to show a strong preference for a domineering stance, which bears some resemblance to a competing style (projecting concerns for ‘self’) that is often disassociated with collectivists. While a large body of literature has focused on conceiving a dichotomy between individualism and collectivism, which often signifies a clear distinction between different conflict-handling styles demonstrated in opposing cultures (e.g. Americans and East Asians), our findings suggest that cultural instincts could frequently deviate from their expected value outcomes in conflict handling based on other peculiarities in value orientation (Okereke et al., 2018). Such peculiarities have been highlighted in our data, evidencing that Nigerian culture is highly rooted in paternalism, deference, servility, and immoderate patriarchy, conceptualised as values projecting status and rank due to the thriving high PD perceived as a socially normalised and dynamically situated social practice. This social practice shape the way in which problematic social interactions are settled, which is not commonly associated with some individualistic cultures and organisational contexts in the West. As such, this research is especially relevant as it is run in a culture different from the ones that were originally investigated and in which managerial books and mainstream practices emerged and thus, we contribute to challenging and enhancing the individualistic and collectivistic theoretical propositions.

Further informed by Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance construct, the authors contribute to the literature by explaining the role that religious beliefs play in shaping conflict management styles. We highlight the cultural significance of legitimising the myth of faith in God as a pathway to the amelioration of a certain level of ambiguity associated with making incorrect conflict-handling decisions; further propagating moral lessons, and stressing mutual obligatory values connected to the need to sustain social cohesion (Chen et al., 2018). As a contribution, we suggest that religion can play an important role in the relief of anxiety linked with conflict management uncertainties (Kogan et al., 2013). This findings potentially provide a clear conceptual explanation of why Nigeria receives an intermediate categorisation in the uncertainty avoidance index, which does not establish a clear preference for uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2010) given people’s attitudes to spiritual belief systems, which frame organisational practices, such as conflict management in this context.

Furthermore, we argue that this evidence gives a more nuanced analysis authenticating the reason for conflict avoidance preferences beyond the restrictive individualistic/collectivistic dimension often used in cross-cultural management literature to theorise cultural differences in conflict handling (Doucet et al., 2009). In addition, our data, which relies on the accounts of female participants in the study, confirms a social dominance orientation (Adisa et al., 2020) that perpetuates masculine hegemony based on a rigid allocation of gender roles, necessitating female HODs to showcase traits associated with men in order to blend into the

stereotype of the ideal manager when settling departmental misunderstandings. Unlike western egalitarian cultures that prioritise gender equality, the deeply embedded patriarchal structures in all systems and institutions in Nigeria confine women who have been socialised in this context to adopt conflict management strategies that are potentially anathema to feminine characteristics.

On a final note, this study has its limitations. A key limitation is that it solely explores the accounts of those in leadership positions in the university (i.e. HODs). Future research could consider the perspectives of other colleagues and subordinates (both academics and non-teaching staff) reflecting on how HODs handle departmental conflicts for the purpose of reporting balanced views on this topic area. In order to maximise credibility, dependability and confirmability of the qualitative findings, future studies could also engage in a discourse analysis or constructivist grounded theory that might explore how national culture interface with organisational culture; exploring studies of this nature may reveal that departmental heads are bricoleurs who may draw on national and organisational ideas to construct explanations for their conflict management behaviours. Furthermore, future quantitative research involving hypothesis testing with larger sample sizes is imperative for generalisation of the findings. Finally, it would be interesting to engage in cross-cultural conflict management studies by collecting data that compares the research context of Nigeria with data collected from western cultures.

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