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Conflict and Conflict Management: How Culture Matters

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Introduction

... we ignore the local cultural narratives and meanings that inform the participants at the peril of misunderstanding the nature and extent of violence. (Jon Abbink, 2001:123)

Many conflicts are embedded in intolerance and prejudices that are culturally constructed. Some others have also remained intractable on account of lack of cultural awareness and intercultural communication. People, most times, do not only see things from their own cultural perspectives, but usually expect "cultural others" to use same lens to cognise and interpret the social environment. Divergent views that emanate from an alternative cultural perception, therefore, necessarily create misunderstanding, which may afterward result in tension, and sometimes, violent conflict. Since human perceptions, values, and organisation of meanings are product of socialisation experience, which usually is context specific, it reasonably follows that cultures around the world may develop different explanation for a singular phenomenon. In other words,

intercultural conflicts occur in the contexts of cultural differences and underscore the way different societies perceive social reality (Kimmel, 2006; Avruch, 2005; Avruch and Black, 1991).

Quite often, when the relevance of culture to conflict and conflict management is acknowledged in peace and conflict studies, it is usually in relation to the impacts, which communication and cultural perception bear on negotiations and mediation processes (Fisher 1980; Weiss 1994; Bercovitch and Elgstrom 2001). Stephen Weiss, for instance, reckons negotiation as duly affected by the actors' basic conception of negotiation, their orientation toward time, their willingness to take risks, their protocol, and their decision-making style (Weiss 1994). Similarly, Ting-Toomey (1999) suggests that cultural and ethnic miscommunication and conflicts often arise due to ignorance of different value priorities in different ethnic communities and cultures. In all of this, the role of culture as a basic factor of human behaviour is abbreviated and reckoned as significant only to the process of conflict management and particularly the

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negotiation process. But the influence of culture on conflict is definitely beyond this. Culture can be both a cause and a way out of conflict. In other words, it can, to a very large extent, condition the ways conflicts are framed and tamed. From all indications, it is almost impossible to disentangle culture from conflict, most especially that culture always shapes human thoughts and attitudes wherever there are differences. Thus Vayrynen (2001:2) argues that "denying culture its constitutive roles paves the way for the assumption that there are culture-free techniques of conflict resolution." For now no such mechanism is available to conflict management experts, and looking for one will not only amount to adducing genetic attribution to most of human behaviours but also rebuffing claims of conflict being entrenched in a series of social processes.

The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate the relevance of culture to conflict and conflict management. In doing this emphasis will be placed on the cultural variability perspective of Ting-Toomey (1999), and the importance of intercultural communication to the conflict management

The Culture Concept

Like many other concepts in the social sciences and humanities, culture is fluid in terms of interpretation, and has been defined severally by authors. Owing to the complexity in conceptualisation some scholars have come to express doubt about the efficacy of culture as an analytical tool (Desch, 1998). Tucker (1996) also observes that the too many definitions of culture make a great lot of people to see it as everything while for some it is nothing.

Meanwhile, the classical definition as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1891 cited in Weiss, 1972: 1379), although often criticised for assuming too much, has gained a wide acceptance, especially in the discipline of anthropology, and it is usually within the ambit that several other descriptions are crafted. Aside the holistic perspective, which the Tylonan conception well exemplifies, some definitions place stress on the fact that behaviour is learned, and yet others have viewed culture as systems of knowledge (Goodenough 1957).

There is also this dichotomy between culture as human universal - an attribute of mankind - and cultures as a people specific -an adaptive strategy of a group. The broad and generic nature of culture is associated with some universal cultural traits that are collectively shared by all of humanity. Examples of such general traits are communicating with a verbal language, using age and gender to classify people, and raising children in some sort of family setting. People everywhere in the world share these traits, though different cultures also develop specific ways in which they are expressed. Upon this, certain behaviours or practices are considered aberrant and reprehensible across the world, and some "best practices" are projected to the level of universal norms. On the other hand, a group's culture or what is otherwise known as local cultures refers to the way of life of a people, especially those attributes that do not just set a group apart from other people but as well constitute the basis of their

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togetherness or better still, their identity. This includes what Avruch (1998) describes as the complex systems of meaning created, shared, and transmitted by individuals in particular social groups, at points in time. Similarly, Kimmel perhaps has local culture in mind when he defines culture as "historical human creations that define what is real and important for those who share them (Kimmel, 2006: 627). Culture in generic term and cultures as particularistic referents, both call attention to a group phenomenon, and are connected to the discourse of conflict. While local cultures tend to emphasise the differences in social groupings and as well form the basis of discriminatory perception and responses, culture in its generic nature stands for the universal and inbuilt capacity of man for conflict as well as conflict resolution (Avruch, 1998).

From the social constructionist point of view culture is constitutive of human reality, and what can be described as the very character of culture is captured in the following lines.

Culture offers a grammar for acting in and interpreting the world, and it refers to widely shared practices and to commonly held assumption and presuppositions that individuals and groups hold about the world. It involves the social structuring of both the world outside the self and the internal world (Vayrynen, 2001: 3).

From the above quote culture is the cause and effect of human actions and behaviours, the determinant of values and ideologies, and a factor in the way we seek information, reach conclusions, and take decisions. It is the rationale for collectivism and explanation for group behaviours, particularly the kind that separate a group from others.

Generally, treatments of culture, especially in contemporary times consider human societies as severally produced by environmental and historical factors that thus form the basis of sociocultural differences. From this point we can start to think of how the savannah environment of northern Nigeria and the early contact with the Arabs inform a culture that is remarkably different from the South's, which is marked by a forest environment and early reception of Western civilisation.

For the purpose of this paper, culture is conceptualised along what Hofstede (1991:5) aptly captures as "collective programming of the mind". It is seen as encompassing a people's experiences over time, especially such that help them shape their perceptions, attitudes, practices, and overall interpretation of social reality. A definition like this underscores the cognitive orientation of culture and represents experiences as basis for human behaviour, including conflict and process of its management.

The Nature of Conflict

In the everydayness of relationships individuals, groups, organisations, communities, and nations are confronted with all manner of differences, which tend to be conflictive. For instance, differences in economic opportunities, ethnic identity, race, religion, or even values often set individuals, people and nations against one another. That the potential for conflict exists wherever people have contact therefore has made conflict to be seen as an ever-present process in human relations (Loomis and Loomis, 1965).

A definition of conflict renders it as an

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intense disagreement process between two interdependent parties over incompatible goals and the interference each perceive from the other in her or his effort to achieve those goals (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Another related but more explicit one conceives of conflict as competition between individuals or groups over incompatible goals or scarce resources, or over the sources of power needed to reach those goals or controls these resources, including the denial of control to others (Avruch, 1998). This approach to conflict is generally described as realism. In both definitions, conflict is conceptualised in material form and the causes are located in individuals and groups' inability to have as much of resources as they would desire. Also arising from the definitions are the ideas of relationship, whether interpersonal or intercultural, and incompatibility of goals as necessary conditions for conflict. But conflict is not just an outcome of competition for scarce resources. Other dimensions of conflict include threats or disputes over territory, which boundaries could be physical, social, or work boundaries, and threats to values, goals, and policies, as well as threats to behaviour (Robinson, 1972). In fact, much of the everyday conflicts that brew around us are predicated on norms and beliefs that are at variance with one another. In other words, causes of conflict may as well be found in opposing views about the nature of a situation, value assumptions, expectations, verbal and nonverbal habits, and interaction scripts of individuals (Ting-Toomey, 1999). This approach to conflict is known as constructivism.

Flowing from the above, conflict may be instigated by either or both of objective

scarcity wherein the parties have similar understanding of the parameters of the contest, and subjective perception of key parameters of contest such as power, resources, scarcity, in which case parties in a conflict understand the world differently (Avruch, 1998).

The Conflict of Culture

One of the fundamental assumptions about conflict is that it involves interaction between parties that may be individual, groups, organisation, and nations. Due to the fact that societies are marked by one form of cultural distinctiveness or the other, individuals or groups with different cultural orientations may have problems reconciling their subjective perceptions whenever they enter into relationship. Meanwhile, differences in values, norms, and beliefs often manifest in miscommunication and misattributions, with a party in conflict considering the other unreasonable, difficult to deal with, and irrational. Intercultural conflict that is implied in this process is defined as the perceived or actual incompatibility of values, norms, processes, or goals between a minimum of two cultural parties over content, identity, relational, and procedural issues (Ting-Toomey, 1999). The definition of intercultural conflict here accommodates the levels of cultural distinction under which conflicts may occur. For instance, conflict may arise between individuals or groups that belong to societies marked by cultural differences, i.e. Yoruba and Igbo, or United States and Afghanistan. Similarly, conflicts may occur among individuals in the same society who belong to different subgroups or subcultures that are •defined largely by kinship, socioeconomic

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classes, education, political interest, and occupation among others. An example will be a conflict between environmental conservationists and poachers over the protection of rare species. Although the two groups may be members of the same country or ethnic group, differences in socioeconomic class and occupation will ensure that they have subjective perceptions of their roles and objectives.

According to Ting-Toomey, apart from miscommunication or lack of understanding, other factors of intercultural conflicts will include deep-seated hatred, and centuries-old antagonism, which could have arisen from long-standing historical grievances. Because culture is a vehicle for transmitting information from one generation to the other, people learn and internalise hate, and construct the cultural "other" not on the basis of contemporaneous reality or experiences but through a cultural toolkit that set the boundary for right and wrong, inclusion and exclusion, and other forms of binary construct and social dichotomy. Such historical grievances can further be exacerbated by some current contestations that tend to draw on historical formations and information for validation. Intercultural conflicts, therefore, may be triggered by the need to right a wrong, or even scores with another group which has been culturally constructed an enemy.

Principally, most of intercultural conflict centre on prejudiced perception of the "other" - frequently flowing from the deep felt belief or feeling of one's culture being more refined and of superior status or that some people's beliefs and practices are awkward and crude. This often results in the interpretation of other

people in terms of one's own cultural values and beliefs. Moreover, others are expected to act and behave in manner dictated by one's own cultural conventions. Creating a stereotype of the "other" as it has been found in the case of many intercultural conflicts does not only render one unreceptive of the positive values inherent in other people's culture, but extensively provokes a counter response, which could be more devastating than envisaged. Furthermore, intercultural conflicts may be associated with attempts to protect individual and group images as the case may be. Parties in that wise are engaged in an unabated struggle to maintain their different positions, which are thought to be sacrosanct, depictive of an advance or superior humanity, and representing a universal truth.

An example of intercultural conflict is that which can arise between two Nigerian lovers, a young Igbo man and a Yoruba lady, over the paternity of a child conceived outside of wedlock. The lady would want the man to accept paternity of the child on the ground of her Yoruba culture's understanding of the legitimate status of every child: at least she knows the man responsible for the pregnancy. Meanwhile, the young Igbo man will decline paternity on account of his own cultural premise, which links paternity of a child with the payment of the mother's bride wealth. Since no bride wealth has been paid, he will definitely feel no obligation as a father. Although the young man would ordinarily have loved to be one, the mere fact that his culture has defined how he could be, and in this case he has fallen short of the prerequisite, necessitates the option he takes. It must be observed, however, that the conflict in

question is not about perception or communication, but rather of value system, which is a corollary of difference in ethnic membership. Resolving this kind of conflict can be a difficult task because it requires that one culture succumbs to the other.

Conflicts, as we can see, challenge the social dynamics of meanings, and as well question individual and group's identities. Instances of conflicts that have proved enduring such as the Ife-Modakeke and the indigene-settler crisis in Plateau and other states in Nigeria are beyond the territorial contest that often appear as the underlying causes. Rather they are well defined and prosecuted within the sociocultural contexts that produce them. Likewise, intractable conflicts in the international arena like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir are not just about territorial, boundary, and sovereignty issue, as they are also about acknowledgement, representation, and legitimisation of different identities and ways of living, being, and making meaning. In conflict of culture it is thus implied that interactions and relationships, which cut cross cultural borders are naturally laden with misunderstanding and misinterpretation of intention and meaning in a way that cultural distinctiveness in its characteristics centrifugal nature serves not only the purpose of obfuscating the possibility of convergence but also constituting the basis of contestation.

Cultural Variability Perspective

A cultural variability perspective as espoused by Ting-Toomey (1999) emphasises the four dimensions of individualism-collectivism, power distance, construal of self, and low or

high-context communication as determinant of the values individuals hold in approaching or avoiding conflict, the way people attributed meanings to conflict events, and the way they communicate in specific conflict episodes.

The individual-collectivism dimension is meant to provide in-depth understanding as to why members of two contrastive cultures approach conflict differently. While individualism refers to the broad value tendencies of people in a culture to emphasise the individual identity over group identity, and individual rights over group obligations, collectivism, in contrast, refers to the broad value tendencies of people in a culture to emphasise the group identity over the individual identity, and ingroup-oriented concerns over individual wants and desires (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis, 1995 cited in Ting-Toomey, 1999). Cultures identified as high in individualistic value tendencies include British, French, German, Scandinavian, Swiss, Australian, Canadian, and the US. On the other hand, many cultures in East Asia, Southeast Asia, Mediterranean, Middle East, and Africa are identified as group-based (Hofstede, 1991 cited in Ting-Toomey, 1999). Although various degrees and forms of individualism and collectivism are said to occur in different cultures, that each culture has a distinctive value priority is established in intercultural communication research. Invariably, people's ignorance of these value priorities often leads to miscommunication and to conflict.

Power distance is related to people's expectations of how they should be treated and how they should treat others. Power distance may be large or low depending on whether interaction between people in high-

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status and low-status positions is formal or informal, and symmetrical or asymmetrical. Countries identified as large power distance cultures are the Philippines, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, Guatemala, Panama, Mexico, and many Arab countries. In these countries, members give priority treatment and asymmetrical respect to people in high-status positions. Examples of countries with small power distance cultures are Denmark, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, and to a moderate degree, the United States. Here, members in either high-status or low-status positions strive to foster informal, symmetrical interaction.

The third dimension, which is self-construal emphasises individual distinction or what may be termed self conceptualisation. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991) as cited in Ting-Toomey (1999), self conception within a culture profoundly influences communication with others, as individuals with a strongly independent sense of self tend to see self as autonomous, self-reliant, unencumbered, and as rational choice-makers. On the other hand, individuals with a strongly interdependent sense of self tend to see themselves as ingroup-bound, obligatory agents, and as harmony seekers. Although the two combinations may exist in a culture, the independent concepts of self are associated more with the individualistic cultures whereas the interdependent concepts of self are more common in collectivistic cultures (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Low and high-context communication as espoused by Ting-Toomey explains conflict style differences between cultures and individuals. In the case of low-context communication, emphasis is on how intention

or meaning can be best expressed through explicit verbal message. In contrast, high context communication emphasises how intention or meaning can be best conveyed through contexts (social roles and positions), and nonverbal channels (pauses, silence, tone of voice) of the verbal message (Hall, 1976 cited in Ting-Toomey, 1999). The independent-self individualists are mainly associated with low-context styles of conflict management, while interdependent-self collectivists are generally regarded as likely to engage in high-context styles of conflict negotiation.

The immediate implication of the cultural variability perspective is that when individuals from different cultural contexts (individualistic/collectivist, large power distance/small power distance, independent self/interdependent self, and low/high-context communication) interact with one another in the course of a dispute, the effects of the difference are strong enough to create communication dissonance and misunderstanding (Avruch 1991).

Culture and Conflict Management

Conflict management refers to the processes involved in preventing or bringing conflicts to an end, and assisting the parties involved to arrive at peaceful settlements, which are not only agreeable to both parties but are as well sustainable. The traditional conflict management approach which is popular in literature recognises five strategies by which conflicts mostly the interpersonal types can be handled. These are collaboration (win/win), compromise (win some/lose some), competition (win/lose), accommodation (lose/win), and avoidance (lose/lose). Although

these negotiating styles are considered to have universal applicability, the particular one adopted is more a function of an individual or group's cultural tool-kit. For example, a five-country study involving the United States of America, Japan, Korea, China, and Taiwan that was meant to demonstrate the utility of the five-style model of negotiating showed that Americans adopted mainly the competitive style whereas the other four countries that fall within what has been described as the collectivist cultures made use of accommodation and avoidance.

Avruch (1998) argues that any discourse of culture that relates to conflict should ordinarily direct attention to problems of intercultural communication, interpretation, and the possibility of diverse metrics for decision making. Generally, individual understanding of conflict and the approach adopted in negotiation are said to be related to the status of a culture either as low-context or high-context. Jennifer Beer (2003) identifies the attributes of low-context and high-context cultures and these are presented in the table.

While each of the two communication styles represents the worldview and the needs of a particular culture, an awareness of difference is bound to help parties in conflict to guard against misperception or what Abbink (2001: 633) refers to as "errors of attribution".

It is usually something else when a third party is involved in a negotiation process. Apart from the fact that he or she may represent a communication style distinct from the parties in conflict, the values espoused and the understanding of conflict issues may prove germane to his functionality even though he

is expected to be neutral and skillful in the art and art of negotiation. Avruch (1991:7) considers the contemporary conflict research theory and the 'Outsider-Neutral' global mediator model as reflecting largely American and Western practices and tradition. In some other cultures, especially those of the collectivist orientation such method of mediation is not achievable and the imagery of a detached rational mediator is considered more of a farce than a possibility. Melville and Bretherton (1994: 16-17) particularly identify the failure to deal with irrational aspects of human behaviour and the role of emotion as two factors that make the 'Outsider-Neutral' model inappropriate for culture like the Arab.

Other proponents of the relevance of culture to conflict management also depend on communication theory and other works centering on the nature and influence of national culture for their explanation. For them, the impacts of culture on negotiations and mediation naturally explain the logical chains between culture and behaviour. Such perspective underscores the relationship between cultural dissonance and negotiation failure, on the one hand, and the influence which culture bears on the positions as well as the strategies of the conflict parties on the other hand (Bercovitch and Elgstrom, 2001). Arguing from a similar direction, Faure and Sjostedt (1993: 9) posits that "cultural background conditions how the actor perceives issues, other actors, and their intentions".

An important understanding that must be developed in the process of intercultural conflict management is that of cultural relativism. The idea that every culture must

be interpreted in its own context or must not be viewed from a borrowed cultural lens is crucial to accommodating foreign positions or making sense out of what otherwise appears absurd and irrational. Cultural relativism does not indicate an endorsement of another culture or acceptance of values that we consider repulsive. Rather, it opens individuals up to other people's views, such that values and beliefs that at the onset may make little or no impact on us can gradually become tolerable. The process involved has also been described as that of "mindful refraining" - a practice wherein parties in conflict learn to translate the other's verbal and nonverbal messages from the context of the other's cultural viewpoint (Ting-Toomey, 1999). In the view of Abbink (2001: 637) "when we have developed such understanding we can more effectively communicate with others as equals and learn about their subjective cultures".

What can be considered the role of culture in conflict management is not just a categorisation of best practices in cross-cultural communication but extends to the aspects of understanding cultural basis of individual and groups' actions or inactions and tailoring intervention toward addressing such idiosyncrasies. For instance, acts that may promote a high level of cultural awareness or shared recognition of cultural subjectivity are necessary to curb the incidence of ethnocentrism or cultural chauvinism. In other words, even conflict avoidance may be enabled through intercultural exploration that prioritises acknowledgment of differences and willingness to create allowance for alternative worldviews.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on how culture colour perceptions and how our perceptions affect both the process of conflict and its management. Here, we are able to establish that human interactions across cultures are laden with differences in cognition and communication styles, which often lead to a form of subjectivity in terms of how views, positions and intentions are rationalised. Basically, what one thinks of a particular issue or the way one acts in an instance of intercultural conflict is always different from what others may want us to think. Such ambivalence underlines most examples of conflict and as well hampers the process of conflict management.

Culture is a constant intervening variable in the management of conflict, and mediators need to at all times bear in mind the underlying cultural elements that drive conflicts. The relevance of culture in the negotiation process commences once panics in conflict approach the negotiation table for the first time with their respective cultural tool kits, which to a very large extent determines the framing and understanding of the problem itself and the perception of the other party in the conflict. Culture's bearing continues throughout the duration of the negotiation process, often shaping the interaction and decision making processes among negotiating parties and modelling the perception of success achieved with the process. Above all, it influences the final outcome of the negotiation process by determining the extent of concession to be made, and the way decisions will be put into operation.

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may be fast assuming relevance in the era of globalisation, and intercultural exploration as Tinham (1979) cited in Abbink (2001: 645) reckons is becoming more needed as human societies "move from the traditional world of bilateral diplomacy to the more complex world of multilateral, permanent negotiations". What this implies is that an approach to conflict management rooted in traditionalism and Western orthodoxy, or that which fail to recognise every case of conflict as produced and nurtured by a set of oppositional values will prove insufficient to produce long-term and sustainable peace building.

Intercultural conflict management therefore requires a great deal of cultural awareness and intercultural communication. Individual's levels of cultural awareness may be measured by people's level of cultural chauvinism, ethnocentrism, tolerance, minimisation, understanding, and integration (Abbink 2001). And in intercultural communication, one is not expected to always hear his or her voice or give high credence to personal position but also regard the other party's voice as worth listening to and as well conveying a message which is not only rational but embodying an alternative perspective that may not be wrong at all times.

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