

Conflict management style in Uganda: a gender perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to investigate whether differences exist in the conflict management styles exhibited by male and female managers at different organizational levels in Uganda.

Design/methodology/approach – Using samples from organizations within Uganda, the paper utilizes the Rahim Organization Conflict Inventory to collect data.

Findings – Independent sample t-tests of the hypotheses reveal that basically no statistically significant differences exist in the way men and women in Uganda handle conflict when dealing with subordinates, peers, or supervisors.

Research limitations/implications – Research is restricted to a convenience sample of educated working men and women in the greater Kampala urban area. The findings serve to dispel the widely held myth that women in Uganda use significantly different management styles than men because of the patrilineal nature of the male dominated society.

Practical implications – The paper shows that Ugandan women exhibit little difference from their male counterparts in how they deal with conflict. They also have much in common with their female counterparts in the developed world in confronting gender based discrimination in the workplace.

Social implications – The findings of this paper neutralize some of the negative connotations about women in Uganda and may help lead to a protracted campaign to change the attitudes toward women in this patriarchal society.

Originality/value – Little is known in Africa about the conflict management styles of women because they are only now becoming a significant element in the economies of developing countries. This paper fills some of gaps.

Keywords Sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda, Gender, Conflict management, Management skills
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This study extends research on gender differences in conflict management styles by focusing on the East African country of Uganda. The ability to handle conflict has long been recognized as an essential management skill that is growing in importance as managers are required to mediate conflicts between organizational stakeholders (Mintzberg, 1973). While extensive research has helped us to understand the dynamics of conflict management, the impact of gender and cultural differences in this critical skill area remains much less clear (Rowley et al., 2010). The role of gender is important because of the obvious link to questions of sexual discrimination in the workplace. It was long assumed that feminine values made women less capable of handling conflict and was used as a justification for not allowing them access to higher level positions (Korabik and Ayman, 1989). The role of culture is important because

different societies impose rewards and sanctions that influence how conflicts are resolved. Thus, what might appear to be a universally accepted finding about conflict management may unravel when tested in a culturally different context (Weiner, 2005). What this study seeks to explore is whether the interaction of culture and gender in a developing country like Uganda opens new questions that need to be answered in generating theories of conflict management behavior.

Almost all of our understanding of conflict management comes from research in the industrialized West (Weiner, 2005). While conflict exists in all societies, those who manage conflict may utilize behaviors that are consistent with the unique qualities of their respective cultures (Ng and Burke, 2004). For example, Gabrielidis *et al.* (1997) found in Mexico that a highly complex relationship exists between culture and gender roles in styles of conflict resolution. Their results suggest the appropriateness of certain approaches to conflict resolution may depend on the cultural context as well as the gender of the individual within that context. Another example of differing conflict resolution styles in contrasting cultures is Doucet *et al.*'s (2009) study of Chinese and American managers. Their study found that Chinese managers embarrass colleagues to teach moral lessons while American managers are more likely to exhibit hostility and vengefulness in managing conflict. Americans and Chinese managers also have very different intentions when using confrontation versus avoidance as a conflict resolution strategy. A third study that addresses the interface between culture and conflict management is Metcalfe's (2008) study of women in Islamic nations. This study found that religion and recognition of the family are important determinants of female identity and the most appropriate way to improve leadership capabilities.

Empirical studies of gender differences in conflict resolution strategies in the cultural context of African nations such as Uganda are nearly nonexistent. What we do know from qualitative research is that women have followed a much different path to finding their way in organizational life than their western counterparts. African women reportedly lost ground during British colonial rule because they were initially excluded from missionary and government sponsored schools. When they were admitted, instruction focused on sewing, cooking, and other domestic skills (Fallon, 2008). Colonialism also imposed European forms of patriarchy in Africa by giving men more authority and opportunity to participate in economic and political activity (Gordon, 1996). However, a major difference between African and Western cultures is that African women were not encouraged to remain in the home because their productivity was critical for maintaining local economies (Fallon, 2008). This point is reflected in Uganda where women outnumber men in the economically active workforce by 4.8 to 4.3 millions (Lucas, 2007).

Patriarchy continues to be the primary problem confronting women in Uganda despite the general improvement in their social and economic status. Much of this improvement is attributed to the political openings accorded to women in the 1980s by President Museveni and the National Resistance Movement. Uganda today is widely viewed as a leader in advancing the rights of women (Tripp, 2001, 2006). Nevertheless, women face significant barriers in achieving equal status with men. As an example, Tripp reports that married women have difficulty finding a political constituency from which they can run for office. They are told to run in the constituency where they married, but the women are then told, "You came here to marry, not to rule" (Tripp, 2006, pp. 116-17). To enter a male network results in Ugandan women being

labeled as “unfeminine” and they are required to answer endless questions about their feminine qualities.

The purpose of this study is to determine if the strongly patriarchal culture of Uganda impacts the way women confront conflict in organizational life and whether female managers are capable of handling conflict as competently as men. The knowledge gained will extend the literature on gender in the relatively unstudied culture of Uganda. It will also help to address the validity of various stereotypes that persist in Uganda which essentially portray women as less capable leaders than men (Appelbaum et al., 2003). The study is somewhat unique methodologically in that subordinate, peer and supervisor perceptions are considered, while most studies consider the subordinate’s view only. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section sets out the hypotheses to be investigated and the methodology to be employed. The findings are then presented, while a conclusion sums up the paper and develops recommendations that can be used to assist future research in this area.

Conflict management research

Findings from many conflict management studies have produced conflicting results. Early psychological studies show that men and women tend to endorse conflict management strategies that complement gender role expectations (Wachter, 1999). They found that men prefer to be more confrontational (Rosenthal and Hautaluoma, 1988), aggressive (Thomas and Kilmann, 1977), and competitive (Rubin and Brown, 1975), while women favor accommodating strategies (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000; Rubin and Brown, 1975). Research findings also suggest that men are more avoiding in their style of conflict management than are women (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000). Where female avoidance behavior occurs, it may have more to do with power differentials than with gender (Korabik et al., 1993; Randel, 2002; Watson and Hoffman, 1996). Furthermore, many men experience anxiety in social settings, and this may explain why men are more likely than women to avoid conflict (Heavey et al., 1993). In general, fairly consistent agreement appears in the literature that gender differences in conflict style tend to show men exhibiting more competitive tendencies. However, findings are more varied as to whether compromising (Holt and DeVore, 2005), accommodating, or avoiding (Cardona, 1995) styles are preferred by women. Little direct evidence bears directly upon gender differences at higher management levels. The Chusmir and Mills (1989) study, which included men and women managers at three levels, found no significant gender effect after controlling for organization level. Their data did show some co-variation between gender and organization level, which could explain that finding.

Conflict management style and gender in Uganda

Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) contends that an individual’s development is a function of interrelated history, cultural, institutional, and communicative processes. This view is supported by Hofstede (1983) who asserts that national cultures are relevant in management practices because culture is embedded in individual beliefs and attitudes. For example, patriarchy as it currently exists in Africa must be understood within the context of Africa’s peripheral and dependent position within the global economy. Women in many African societies typically face more disadvantages and exploitation than do men. They must cope not only with poverty and underdevelopment; they are also subject to deep seated patriarchal attitudes and practices.

These patriarchal attitudes and practices, which privilege men, continue to permeate African societies from the level of the family up to the level of public and private institutions (Gordon, 1996).

Uganda very much reflects the culture of the broader African society. The cultural foundation of Uganda evolves out of a diverse range of largely rural ethnic groups that make up this East African country of over 50 million people. Within this cultural diversity are common threads of gender inequality embedded in patriarchal beliefs (Kaleeba et al., 1991; Mirembe and Davies, 2001; Obbo, 1995). Ugandan women are subject to the wishes of their fathers and later to their husbands. Further, it is unusual for a woman to be granted inheritance as it is supposed to follow the patrilineal line. Male dominance goes beyond fathers and husbands to include men dominating most societal institutions (Mies, 1998). Female subservience (e.g. kneeling while greeting one's father and husband in many areas of Uganda) is an accepted custom by most men and women in Ugandan society.

Such beliefs perpetuate the power imbalance between males and females, and it is this imbalance that becomes part of the socialization process of children (Mirembe and Davies, 2001). Hence the conflict management strategy adopted by Ugandan women managers could be based on the powerlessness associated with their position in society. This assumption has a theoretical basis in research studies which show that female avoidance of conflict has more to do with power differentials than with gender differences (Brahnam et al., 2005; Korabik et al., 1993; Randel, 2002; Watson and Hoffman, 1996). Against this background, it is hypothesized:

- H1. Male managers in Uganda use more of competing (dominance) conflict management style than do women managers.
- H2. Women managers in Uganda use more avoidance style than do male managers.

Women and interpersonal relationships

Research suggests that women bring a different management style to the work place. Women's leadership style involves more participation, motivation by inclusion, and power by charisma (Rutherford, 2001). Relational theory (Miller, 1976; Terjesen et al., 2007) argues that women develop a sense of self and personal worth, which is shaped by a sense of connection to others. Consistent with this theory, women's satisfaction is linked to the development of interpersonal relationships (Powell and Graves, 2003). In a meta-analysis of job attitude studies, Konrad et al. (2000) found significant sex differences consistent with gender roles and stereotypes, especially the gender stereotype that interpersonal relationships are more important to women. Other studies have also shown that women are socialized to be more concerned with interpersonal aspects of relationships than are men (Valentine, 2001). Women prefer to use negotiation and mediation. They are also better able to empathize with another person's perspective. Against this background, the following hypotheses are advanced:

- H3. Women managers in Uganda will use more compromising style than do men managers.
- H4. There is a difference in the use of obliging (accommodation) style between women managers and men managers in Uganda.

Socialization and selection

Research has established that women managers differ from non managerial women in their conflict management style, but much less so from men who are managers. In other words, few differences are seen in the behavior or effectiveness of male and female managers who occupy similar positions (Korabik et al., 1993; Powell and Graves, 2003). A possible explanation as to the similarity in conflict management styles is that two factors impact women managers – socialization and selection – which make them appear to be more like their male counterparts in terms of their organizational behavior (Korabik and Ayman, 1989). The assumption is that masculine and feminine characteristics can be found in either men or women (Havenga, 2006). They are conceptualized as independent dimensions and that individuals of each sex are able to process high levels of each. Consequently, females who strongly identify with their female role tend to avoid occupations not occupied by their gender. On the other hand, Brahnman et al. (2005) point out that women who enter positions dominated by men are not gender typical, nor are they afraid of being labeled as unfeminine. At the cost of greater sex role conflict (Chusmir and Koberg, 1989), the evidence suggests that women are willing to abandon their gender role expectations and mould them to the prescriptions of the managerial role (Jago and Vroom, 1982; Korabik et al., 1993; Watson and Hoffman, 1996). It is therefore hypothesized that:

- H5. There is no difference in the use of integrating (collaboration) style between women and men managers in Uganda.

Methodology

Terminology

This paper adopts the conflict style terminology used by Thomas (1992, 1996). Briefly, conflict involves situations in which the things people care about appear to be incompatible. In these situations, intentions can be described along two independent dimensions – cooperativeness (attempting to satisfy the other's concern) and assertiveness (attempting to satisfy one's own concern). Five conflict styles are defined in terms of those dimensions. Competing (low cooperativeness, high assertiveness) is the attempt to satisfy one's own concern at the other's expense. Its opposite style is accommodating (high cooperativeness, low assertiveness), which sacrifices one's own concern in favor of the other person. Avoiding (low cooperativeness, low assertiveness) neglects both people's concerns by sidestepping or postponing a conflict issue. Collaborating (high cooperativeness, high assertiveness) is an attempt to find an integrative or win/win solution that fully satisfies both people's concerns. Finally, compromising (intermediate in both cooperativeness and assertiveness) is an attempt to find a middle-ground settlement that only partially satisfies each person's concern. (Holt and DeVore (2005) should be consulted for a description of terminological differences between this and other frameworks.)

Data collection instrument

The study utilized the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROC-II) to collect data, because it has a higher internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) than other instruments (Ben-Yoav and Banai, 1992). For example, Gross and Guerrero (2000) established that ROC-II dimensions yielded acceptable reliability coefficients, i.e. 0.77-0.83 (integrating), 0.68-0.72 (obliging), 0.75-0.79 (dominating), 0.72-0.86

(avoiding), and 0.67-0.76 (compromising). Rahim and Magner (1995) have argued that the ROC-II model has a better fit with the data than two, three, or even four factor conflict style handling models. ROC-II measures the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict using 30 items, on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "1 – strongly disagree" to "5 – strongly agree." The respondents were requested to evaluate how they handle conflicts along these dimensions when dealing with subordinates, peers, and supervisors. Factor analysis by promax (oblimin) rotation was used to yield oblique (correlated factors), followed by a reliability analysis. Independent sample t-tests were then done to test the various hypotheses of the study.

Research population

Three sets of data were collected from a convenience sample of working adult graduate students and staff at Uganda Christian University (UCU). The students occupy managerial positions throughout the country and they come to the university for a period of one month for face to face contact with their lecturers. They were requested by someone other than the researchers to complete the questionnaire during class time. Data were also collected from teaching and non teaching staff at UCU, as well as managers in various organizations including a major bank in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. All of the respondents consisted of persons occupying managerial positions. Owing to the nature of the study, common method bias was bound to occur. Thus, the respondents were assured that no answers were either right or wrong. While all respondents were fully fluent in English, care was taken to modify the language slightly in some items of the research instrument to make questions clearer and suitable to the Ugandan environment. For instance, the phrase being "put on the spot" has little meaning to Ugandans.

Results

In all, 217 usable questionnaires were collected with 76 (35 percent) answering the subordinates' questionnaires, 74 (34 percent) answering the peers' questionnaire, and 67 (30.9 percent) answering the supervisors' questionnaire. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 (0.5 percent) to 56 (1.4 percent) with a mode of 30 (8.8 percent). Of the respondents, 58.1 percent were male and 41.9 percent were female. They held 45 different positions ranging from assistant to the dean to principal accountant and had stayed with their organizations from one year (12.4 percent) to 25 years (1.4 percent), with most of them having stayed in their respective organizations for four years (15.2 percent). Psychometric evaluation of the instrument was skipped since it has already been validated in earlier studies. A composite measure was formed from individual items in each dimension under peers, supervisors, and subordinates by computing Z-scores of each item, summing them, and then getting an average score for each dimension. We then used the independent samples t-test to compare mean values of the dimensions across the two genders as presented in Tables I-III. The results show no difference between both genders in the use of conflict management styles towards peers (Table I), supervisors (Table II), and subordinates (Table III), since $p > 0.05$ in all cases. Thus, H1-H4 are not supported, while H5 is supported.

Discussion and managerial implications

Consistent with earlier studies (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Korabik et al., 1993; Powell and Graves, 2003; Watson and Hoffman, 1996), this study finds little difference in the way

						Conflict management style
Dimension	Sex	n	df	t	Sig.	
Avoiding	Male	40	67	20.35	0.724	<hr/> 515 <hr/>
	Female	29				
Dominating	Male	42	70	0.699	0.487	
	Female	30				
Obliging	Male	42	68	0.659	0.512	
	Female	28				
Compromising	Male	41	69	20.48	0.628	
	Female	30				
Integrating	Male	42	70	0.096	0.908	
	Female	30				

Table I.
t-tests for peers

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t-tests for peers

Dimension	Sex	n	df	t	Sig.
Avoiding	Male	36	61	0.231	0.818
	Female	27			
Dominating	Male	36	59	0.387	0.574
	Female	25			
Obliging	Male	34	57	0.166	0.818
	Female	25			
Compromising	Male	36	61	0.442	0.122
	Female	27			
Integrating	Male	36	60	1.44	0.154
	Female	26			

Table II.
t-tests for supervisors

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t-tests for supervisors

Dimension	Sex	n	df	t	Sig.
Avoiding	Male	37	67	0.533	0.610
	Female	32			
Dominating	Male	39	69	0.630	0.531
	Female	32			
Obliging	Male	38	67	0.026	0.979
	Female	31			
Compromising	Male	37	67	0.853	0.397
	Female	32			
Integrating	Male	37	67	0.942	0.349
	Female	32			

Table III.
t-tests for subordinates

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t-tests for subordinates

men and women manage conflict, contrary to studies like Brewer et al. (2002) and Rahim (2001). It is particularly noteworthy that findings of this study come from a collectivist society which differs from Holt and DeVore (2005) which found men to be more competing in style than women in individualistic cultures such as the USA. This finding may at first seem surprising given the strong patriarchal and patrilineal nature of Uganda society. However, as in western society, the internalization of business activity makes efficient conflict management essential to the operation of organizations at all management levels regardless of gender (Brahnam et al., 2005; Doucet et al., 2009).

Much like Burke et al. (2006), we find the absence of gender differences on conflict management styles to be a positive sign of progress in the experiences of women in organizations. The findings confirm the fact that women are willing to abandon gender role expectations and mould themselves to the prescriptions of the managerial role (Jago and Vroom, 1982; Korabik, 1990, Korabik et al., 1993; Watson and Hoffman, 1996). As Korabik et al. (1993) commented, there are no actual differences in the leadership styles, motivation or effectiveness of male and female managers who occupy the same position. In the present study, all the respondents were mostly middle position managers. A possible explanation is the dual process of socialization and selection (Korabik and Ayman, 1989). Men and women who occupy similar positions behave the same.

In Uganda, the labor force participation rate of women in Uganda is the highest in sub Saharan Africa. Women contribute 50 percent of gross domestic product, 39 percent of registered business, but they represent 80 percent of the unpaid workers (Ellis et al., 2006, UN, 2009). Research examining work within business settings in Uganda shows that women in the private sector in this country may be subject to the same pressures in the work place as women in the developed economies (Lucas, 2007) in the form of sexual harassment, occupational segregation, and stereotypical attitudes. The findings of this study should be able to neutralize some of these negative connotations about women in Uganda. Since women are better able to manage relationships than men, a combination of this attribute with the ability to manage conflict as effectively as men puts women in a more competitive position than men in a work setting.

The practical implication of these findings is that women in Uganda should be given the same opportunities as men in the work setting. In short, a protracted campaign is needed to change the attitudes of Ugandan society towards women. Attitudes toward leadership is a stronger predictor of leader emergence than masculinity (Kolb, 1999), but women may be at a disadvantage because the more docile, un-leader-like impression they have been socialized to project sends a message of leadership incompetence. As such the roles that women have been taught to play and the attitudes they have been encouraged to assume seem to signal a certain "second class" status.

The research findings suggest the specific component of attitudes toward leadership more than overall gender classification of masculinity might be what causes group members to view individuals as leaders, although masculinity is still relevant (Kolb, 1997). In Uganda, most occupations are the preserve of men, and some are the preserve of women simply because of the tendency of males to denigrate women. It is common to hear phrases like "Are you a woman?" when men are referring to any male who does not measure up to a task. This sort of attitude can only be broken by the dissemination of study findings that advance the view that men and women have the same conflict management abilities. Patriarchy can also be conquered once parents learn that their daughters can manage conflict (and the family treasure) just as well as their sons. This study makes a contribution in that direction.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether a significant difference exists between the way males and females manage conflict in organizations. This difference is one of the major reasons cited for denying women an opportunity to ascend to the top in Ugandan organizations. What this study has established is that no statistically significant differences exist between the genders in the use of the conflict management styles when

they are relating to their subordinates, peers, or supervisors. It is hoped these findings will help to overcome certain gender stereotypes in Uganda that influence perceptions of women and men, where men are accorded positive attributes and women negative ones. Since women's leadership involves more participation, motivation by inclusion, and power by charisma, efforts should be made to increase the number of women in the top positions of organizations. Although this study was carried out in the Ugandan context, the findings can be generalized to many countries in the sub-Saharan context because of similarities in culture across the East African region. It is hoped this study will contribute to the social and economic development agenda of many of these states through a change in attitude toward women.

Limitations of the study

The study utilized a small convenience sample of primarily middle managers. However, this is common in many similar studies (Thomas et al., 2007). In spite of this limitation, the study findings provide a platform from which a diagnosis of conflict management styles in Uganda can be discussed.

Future research

In order to further the cause of women in Uganda, a need exists to examine organizational determinants of women in management. A related need is to learn how organizational variables influence the opportunities women job candidates get compared to men in this country. This knowledge could help mitigate constraints to women advancement to the top of organizations in an emerging market context.

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