COUNSELLING FOR EFFECTIVE AND APPROPRIATE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AMONG NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS USING THE COMPETENCE MODEL OF CONFLICT COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the five conflict communication as proposed by Papa and Canary (1995) to find out the association between the five conflict communication styles and the three competence measures of effectiveness and appropriateness.

100 undergraduate students of university of Lagos living in two of the hostels were used as the subject for this study to obtain the needed data.

Five hypotheses were tested and the results showed that both integrating and compromising of conflict communication had significant positive association with effectiveness. Integrating style had a positive association with situational appropriateness compromising style had a significant positive association with relational appropriateness.

Both dominating and avoiding styles had negative association with relational appropriateness. Dominating style also had negative association with situational appropriateness while avoiding style had negative association with effectiveness. Obliging style did not emerge as a significant predictor whether positively or negatively. These results were discussed and the counselling implications explained.

INTRODUCTION

Communication that is personally rewarding, helpful, useful, and successful is perceived as effective. Within the competence model, appropriateness is defined somewhat differently than it is in the management literature. Specifically, appropriate communication involves avoiding violating relationally or situationally sanctioned rules (Papa & Canary, 1995). The competence model of conflict communication focuses on three dimensions of competent communication:

♦ effectiveness,

♦ relational appropriateness, and

♦ situational appropriateness.

Effectiveness communication can be used to achieves the valued objectives or goals of the organizational members (Papa & Canary, 1995).

Relational appropriateness, which Canary and his colleagues labeled as specific appropriateness refers to behaviour that is generally prosocial and constructive in nature. Thus, individuals who are rude or make tactless comments will be perceived low in relational appropriateness.

Situational appropriateness, in contrast, refers to a more global assessment of a speaker's style, which includes the ability to carry on a smooth conversation and to successfully adapt to the needs of a given situation.

Canary and his colleagues have used the term "general appropriateness" to refer to this type of competence.

The way that people perceive their own and their partners' conflict styles is a key determinant of competence. In fact, according to the competence model of conflict (Papa & Canary 1995; Spitzberg, Canary & Cupach, 1994), perceptions are just as important, if not more important, than actual communication. Furthermore, individuals may see themselves a highly effective and appropriate when using certain strategies, such a dominance, which allow them to fulfill their personal goals. Their partners, however, may see these same strategies as inappropriate. Thus, Canary and Spitzberg (1987, 1990) suggested that people use different criteria to judge themselves versus their partners. Specifically, they argued that effectiveness may be best assessed from the actor's point of view because the actor is the best judge from the partner's perspective. Based on this reasoning this study includes people's perceptions of their own conflict behaviour (self-reports) and their partner's conflict behaviour (partner-perceptions).

In general, the more effective and appropriate a person is perceived to be during a conflict situation, the more competent he or she will be judged. It is important to note, however, that people can be effective without being appropriate, and vice versa. Someone who simply tells his/her colleagues that they must engage in a task even though they would

prefer not to. Thus, depending on the situation, the same strategy can be viewed as more or less competent.

The five conflict communication styles advocated by Papa and Canary (1995) are:

1.   Integrating: high concern for both self and others
2.   Dominating: high concern for self and low concern for others
3.   Obliging: low concern for self and high concern for others
4.   Avoiding: low concern for both self and others, and
5.   Compromising: moderate levels of concern for both self and others.

According to Pap and Canary's (1995) model, each conflict style is associated with a unique profile of perceptions related to competence.

Statement of the Problem

Since nobody is an Island, people interact with one another and in course of such interaction, interpersonal conflicts might arise. Such conflict could have devastating effect on the psychological well being of the individuals if not effectively and appropriately managed. This is more so among students on the same campus who cherish their peer group's acceptance without which their peace of mind as well their educational pursuits could be negative affected.

Individuals who are able to communicate their feelings rightly are likely to be able to manage their conflict more effectively and maintain positive relationships and cohesiveness. On the other hand, individuals who have difficulties in handling interpersonal conflicts might become frustrated and dissatisfied with other around them (Canary, Cupach and Messman, 1995).

Self-centered individuals usually focus on achieving their own selfish goals in relationships while those who manifest a high concern for others focus on how their behaviour would affect others. This concern for people according to Blake and Mouton (1970), involves considerations based on relational needs that underlie the conflict including the issue of trust and understanding.

Such a focus also involves maintaining a positive relationship that sets the stage for smooth future interaction and for granting the partner some level of influence. This dimension appears to be more focused on issues of appropriateness than of effectiveness. It is important to engage in behaviour that is relationally and situationally appropriate in order to maintain positive relations with others. Thus, individuals who are focused on other people tend to use constructive or cooperative conflict style, (Hocker and Wilmot, 1998).

Purpose of Study

This study attempts to analyse the effectiveness and appropriateness of the competence model of conflict communication advocated by Papa and Canary (1995) on the undergraduate students conflicts management. Specifically, the study examines the five conflict communication styles (integrating; dominating; obliging; avoiding; and compromising) to find out their relative effectiveness and appropriateness in the management of conflict among undergraduate students.

Research Hypotheses

i.   Students who use of an integrating style of conflict communication will be positively associated with effective and appropriate behaviour.

ii.   Students who make use of a dominating style of conflict communication will be positively associated with effective and appropriate behaviour.

iii. Students who make use of an obliging style of conflict communication will be positively associated with effective and appropriate behaviour.

iv.   Students who make use of an avoiding style of conflict communication will be positively associated with effective and appropriate behaviour.

v.   Students who make use of a compromising style of conflict communication will be positively associated with effective and appropriate behaviour.

Method

Population – All Nigerian undergraduate students of university of Lagos, constitute the population of this study.

Sample

The sample consist of 100 students (50 males and 50 females) living in two of the hostels on campus and chosen through a process of random sampling. From the initial group of 320 undergraduate students who responded to Rahim Organisation Conflict Instrument (ROCI). The participants fall within the age range of 16-52 years with a mean age of 21-23 years.

Research Instrument

Two research instruments were used in this study, one of the research instruments was Form C part of Rahim Organisational Conflict Instrument (ROCI – II) which has to do with peer-peer was used to select the 100 participants out of the 320 initially selected through stratified sampling.

This instrument has high validity and reliability coefficient. For example, Cronbach's and coefficient for each of ROCI – II's subscales ranged from .77 – .83 for integrating; .68- .72 for obliging; .75- .79 for dominating; .72- .86 for avoiding; and .67- .74 for compromising (Kings and Miles, 1990) Higher scores on a particular subscale indicate that people use more of that particular conflict communication style.

The second instrument made use of in this research was the interpersonal communication competency scale (ICCS) developed by Spitzberg and Canary (1985). This instrument measures three dimensions of competence effectiveness, relational appropriateness. In the ICCS, effectiveness is measured with 11 items, which relate to whether or not the speaker accomplished his or her perceived goals. All items are measured using the 5 point scales. Examples of items measuring effectiveness include 'my partner obtained his or her goal in the conversation and 'my partner seemed to find the conversation to be very useful and helpful'. Relational appropriateness is measured by 4 items that tap into particular behaviour enacted during the interaction, and how suitable or proper these behaviours were. Examples of items measuring relational appropriateness include: "some of the things my partner said were embarrassing to me" and "my partner said some things that should not have been said". Situational appropriateness, in contrast is measured by 5 items that assess a person's general behaviour across the entire interaction. Examples of the items include

"my partner was a smooth conversationalist", and 'my partner's conversation was very suitable to the situation".

ICCS also have high validity and reliability coefficient. The Cronbach's and coefficient of ICCS's subscale reliabilities range from 85-91 for appropriateness subscales, and 85-93 for effectiveness (Spitzberg and Canary, 1985).

Procedure

The 100 participants consisting of 50 males and 50 females were grouped into 25 Dyads each for males and females (2 roomates forming a Dyads). From their initial response to ROCI – 11, they were grouped into the 5 conflict communication styles based on their scores – 10 Dyads in each conflict communication styles. All the participants were asked to discuss with their partners the topic "military rule is better than civilian rule".

A coin was tossed to determine who would speak for and called A (those who choose head) and who would speak against and called B (those who choose tail).

The researcher arranged for their meeting in the auditorium for one hour forty-five minutes to debate the topic in dyads. After the debate, she with the help of a proctor gave the ICCS to the participants grouped in dyads to complete. The scores were collated for statistical analysis.

Results

The scores were analysed using regression analysis to test all the hypotheses.

Research Hypothesis I – V were tested using the regression analysis statistics and the results are as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1
Regression Analysis Results of the Students Dyad Groups A and B.

Criterion Variable	Predictors	R²	df	F
Effectiveness				
A's Perception of B	Block 1		(2, 49)	2.01
	Block 2		(19,48)	2.25
	Integrating	.24	(9,45)	3.63*
	Dominating		(9,45)	1.07
	Obliging		(9,45)	1.89
	Avoiding		(9,45)	4.02*
	Compromising		(9,45)	2.04
B's Perception of A	Block 1		(2, 49)	1.58
	Block 2	.13	(19,48)	2.12*
	Integrating		(9,45)	1.73
	Dominating		(9,45)	0.99
	Obliging		(9,45)	1.43
	Avoiding	.22	(9,45)	3.81*
	Compromising		(9,45)	1.75
Relational Appropriateness				
A's Perception of B	Block 1		(2, 49)	1.38
	Block 2		(19,48)	1.76
	Integrating		(9,45)	.81
	Dominating	.31	(9,45)	4.52*
	Obliging		(9,45)	1.02
	Avoiding		(9,45)	1.77
	Compromising	.28	(9,45)	3.81*
B's Perception of A	Block 1		(2, 49)	1.45
	Block 2		(19,48)	1.08
	Integrating		(9,45)	1.93
	Dominating	.31	(9,45)	4.34*
	Obliging		(9,45)	1.67
	Avoiding	.24	(9,45)	3.51*
	Compromising		(9,45)	1.89

Situational Appropriateness

A's Perception of B	Block 1		(2, 49)	0.73
	Block 2		(19,48)	1.04
	Integrating	.25	(9,45)	3.82*
	Dominating		(9,45)	1.48
	Obliging		(9,45)	2.06
	Avoiding		(9,45)	1.58
	Compromising		(9,45)	1.93
B's Perception of A	Block 1		(2, 49)	1.81
	Block 2	.17	(19,48)	3.32*
	Integrating		(9,45)	2.01
	Dominating	.29	(9,45)	4.08*
	Obliging		(9,45)	1.91
	Avoiding		(9,45)	1.74
	Compromising		(9,45)	1.35

Note: Block 1 included two covariates sex of person. A, and sex of person B Block 2 include the corresponding partner scores.
$*P< .05$

Table 2
Summary of Significant Variables in the Final Regression Models

Criterion Measure	Control Variables	Predictor Variables
Effectiveness:		
A's Perceptions of B	None	Integrating (+)
		Avoiding (-)
		Compromising (+)
B's Perceptions of A	Integrating (+)	Avoiding (-)
Relational Appropriateness:		
A's Perceptions of B	None	Compromising (+)
		Dominating (-)
B's Perceptions of A	None	Avoiding (-)
Situational Appropriateness		
A's Perceptions of B	None	Integrating (+)
B's Perceptions of A	Dominating (-)	Dominating (-)

Note: Control variables refer to the corresponding partner scores on the five conflict styles.
The (+) and (-) designations indicate positive or negative association respectively.

Discussion of Findings

Research Hypothesis I was supported in that integrating style of conflict communication was positively associated with perceptions of effectiveness. Also this style of conflict communication was also significantly positively associated with situational appropriateness. This finding is in consonance with Cross and Guerrero (2000) that the integrating style focuses on problem solving in a collaborative fashion. Individuals with this style conflict directly and try to find new and creative solutions to problems by focusing on their own needs as well as on the needs of others.

Research hypothesis II was rejected because the result showed that the dominating style had only a significantly negative association with perception of relational and situational appropriateness. This finding supports Hocker and Wilmot (1998) that the dominating style relies on the use of position power, aggression, verbal dominance, and perseverance. This style is direct and uncooperative. Forcing or competing behaviours associated with a dominating style include confrontational remarks, accusations, personal criticism, rejection, hostile imperatives or threats, antagonistic jokes or teasing, aggressive questions, presumptive remarks, and denials of responsibility at the expense of the other person. Within interpersonal contexts, the dominating style has been found to be associated with low levels of effectiveness and appropriateness.

Research Hypothesis II was also rejected in that obliging did not emerged as significant predictors. This finding is in dissonance with Hocker and Wilmot (1998) who posit that individuals who use the obliging is associated with accommodating behaviours that include putting aside one's own needs to please the partner, passively accepting the decisions the partner makes, making yielding or conceding statements, denying or failing to express one's needs, and explicitly expressing harmony and cooperation in a conflict episode.

But in consonance with Papa and Canary (1995) who found out in their use of the competence model that individuals using the obliging style of conflict communication were perceived as ineffective.

Research Hypothesis IV was rejected in that the results showed that an avoiding conflict communication style only produce significantly negative association with both effectiveness and relationally appropriateness. This finding is in agreement with Papa and Canary (1995) who posited that the avoiding style of conflict communication was viewed as low in both effectiveness and appropriateness. Avoiding occurs when people physically or psychologically remove themselves from the conflict scene or episode often by denying the conflict, being indirect and evasive, changing and/or avoiding topics, employing non-committal remarks, and making irrelevant remarks or joking as a way to avoid dealing with the conflict at hand.

Research Hypothesis V was accepted because the results showed a significant association between the compromising style of conflict communication and effectiveness as well as relational appropriateness. The association was positive in both cases.

This finding is in support of Hocker and Wilmot (1998) that the compromising style is seen as moderately direct and cooperative. Compromising requires searching for an intermediate position, through strategies such as splitting the differences, meeting the partner halfway, suggesting a trade-off, maximizing wins while minimizing losses, and offering a quick, short-term resolution to the conflict at hand. As such compromising typically satisfies some of each person's needs. So, when people have radically different goals and cannot collaborate to create a solution that will satisfy all of their needs, compromising is often seen as the best option.

Conclusion and the Counselling Implications

The results of this study support the competence model of conflict communication styles especially with regard to the area of effectiveness and appropriateness. In interpersonal relationships, it is important for the individuals to watch their communication styles in order to live a peaceful and enjoyable life both at home or at school/work.

More research work is however needed to establish the proper link between these five conflict communication styles and the three competence measures so that counsellors could have access to a lot of helpful information on how best to manage conflicts in interpersonal relationships.

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