*Full Length Research Paper*

# Psychosocial determinants of conflict-handling behaviour of workers in oil sector in Nigeria

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**The study examined the joint and relative influence of three psychosocial factors: Emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill on conflict-handling behaviour of oil workers in Nigeria. Survey research design was adopted and a sample of 610 workers was randomly selected from oil companies across the country. Data were collected using emotional intelligence scale (r=0.78), communication skill scale (r=0.76), interpersonal skill scale (r=0.86) and conflict handling behaviour inventory (r=0.79). Three research questions were answered using multiple regression and correlation matrix. The three independent variables jointly predicted the conflict-handling behaviour of the respondents (R=0.464). Specifically, the predictors contributed 21.1% (adjusted R2=0.121) to the variance of the dependent measure. This contribution is shown to be significant (F (3,606) =55.448; P<0.05). Also, each of the independent variables significantly (p<0.05) predicted the dependent variable, with communication skill having the greatest relative contribution (B=0.179; t=8.529; p<0.05). Similarly, the result of the correlation matrix showed significant (p<0.01) positive relationships between the predictors and the criterion variable. These are emotional intelligence (r=0.314\*\*), communication skill (r=0.387\*\*) and interpersonal skill (r=0.146\*\*). The three factors predicted conflict-handling behaviour of oil workers. Therefore, government and employers of labour in oil sector could consider these factors when designing intervention training programme(s) aimed at enhancing the conflict-handling behaviour of their workers to reduce industrial conflict in the sector.**

**Key words:** Emotional intelligence, communication skill, interpersonal skill, conflict-handling behaviour, oil workers, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

In every human grouping conflict is bound to ensue. This is largely due to the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and/or groups that constitute the social organization (Edwards, 2000; Omoluabi, 2001; Otite, 2001). It has been argued that conflict is not inherently harmful neither destructive rather its outcome depends largely on how it is handled by the parties involved (Hammed, 2002; Ogunyemi, 2005; Bankole and Kester, 2008).

However, the increasing rate of industrial conflict in Nigeria particularly in the oil sector has been attributed to the conflict-handling behaviour of the oil workers who seem to lack the skills required of them to manage conflict effectively (Hammed and Ayantunji, 2002; Ogunyemi, 2004; Animashaun, 2007; Bankole, 2008).

Though past studies had identified some skills such as emotional intelligence, assertiveness skill, interpersonal skill, communication skill and a host of others that can stimulate general positive behaviours in individuals, nevertheless, not much has been done relating to the specific effects of the skills on conflict handling behaviours of workers especially in oil sector where industrial conflicts tend to be more prominent in Nigeria. For example, between 1999 and 2004, the prices of oil products were increased seven times and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) organized nationwide protests in coalition with 30 other civil society organizations four times to force the government to revert to the pre-deregulation prices (Onyeonuru, 2004).

It is on this basis that this study investigated the effect of such skills as emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill on conflict-handling behaviours of workers in oil sector in Nigeria. Conflict-handling behaviour as a concept refers to the behavioural orientation of an individual in conflict situation. Mitchell (2002) identified five basic conflict handling behaviours

namely:

**Dominating style:** The dominating style relies on the use of position, power, aggression, verbal dominance and perseverance. Individuals with dominating style go all out to win their objective and, as a result, often ignore the needs and expectations of the other party. This style depicts a win-lose situation where an individual has high concern for self and low concern for others. It is a power oriented style because it typically involves fighting for a right or defending a position stubbornly and rigidly through persistent argument. Individual with dominating style is very assertive and not cooperative. Thus, the dominating style is effective but not appropriate.

**Accommodating style:** The accommodating style presents a lose-win situation in which an individual plays down the differences and emphasizes commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. An individual with this style has high concern for others and low concern for self. This style is thus an opposite of dominating style because it involves an element of self-sacrifice and is a reflection of low self-esteem. This style is considered appropriate but not effective.

**Avoiding style:** The avoiding style represents a lose-lose situation. Individuals with avoiding style may physically or psychologically remove themselves from the conflict scene, postpone an issue until a better time, simply withdraw from a threatening situation, change and/or avoid topics, employ noncommittal remarks or make irrelevant remarks or jokes as a way to avoid dealing with the conflict at hand. This style does not solve the problem rather it postpones the evil day, or opportunity to ignite.  Thus, it leaves the parties feeling more hurt, frustrated, annoyed, angry and resentful. The avoiding style is generally seen to be ineffective and inappropriate.

**Collaborating style:** The collaborating style focuses on problem solving in a collaborative fashion. It is the opposite of avoiding because it involves high concern for self and for others. Individuals with this style face conflicts directly and try to find new and creative solutions to the problems by focusing on their own needs as well as on those of others. The style leads to win-win situation and both parties are usually satisfied with the outcome of the resolutions and relationships are often restored. Thus, the collaborating style is regarded to be appropriate and effective.

**Compromising style:** The compromising style involves give-and-take or sharing whereby both parties sacrifice for a mutually acceptable decision. It may mean trading concessions, splitting the difference, or finding a satisfactory middle ground. It is a unique style of handling

conflict because it represents the mid-point on the dimensions of production orientation versus people orientation. It is based on the principle of reciprocity. Thus, the compromising style is partially appropriate and partially effective.

However, the focus of this study was not to consider which of the identified conflict-handling behaviours is the most appropriate in managing industrial conflict in all situations, rather the study was interested in investigating the influence of the three identified skills (emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill) on conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers in Nigeria.

Emotional intelligence has been described by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as the ability to monitor one's own feelings and emotions as well as those of others; to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions. In essence, the skill of emotional intelligence enables an individual to cope with demands and challenges of everyday life.

In corroboration with Salovey and Mayer (1990) views on emotional intelligence, Aremu (2007) described emotional intelligence as the management of one's emotions in such a way that those emotions do not constitute nuisance to the individual and the significant others around him/her. In other words, it is the ability to understand oneself and others as one relates to people and adapt and cope with one's surroundings.

Dreyfus (1999) averred that emotional intelligence distinguishes an individual as star performer and also plays an important role in determining which organization will outperform in the global competition. Goleman (1999) considered emotional intelligence to be a bigger predictor of workplace success than intelligent quotient. He stated categorically that an individual's success at work is 70% dependent on emotional intelligence and only 20% dependent on intelligent quotient. Drawing inference from the work of Salovey and Mayer (1990), Goleman (1995) identified five basic elements of emotional intelligence, namely: Self-awareness, mood management, self-motivation, empathy and managing relationship (social skill).

Relating emotional intelligence to conflict management, Debra and James (1997) affirmed that people who lack emotional intelligence especially empathy or the ability to view life from another person's perspective are more likely to be causes of conflict rather than managers of conflict.

In his contributions, Fajana (2009) described emotional intelligence as the ability to accurately identify and understand one's emotional reactions and those of others. This, according to Fajana, includes the ability to regulate one's emotions and to use them to make good decisions and act effectively. Fajana stressed further that it is emotional intelligence that provides the bedrock for many other competences that are critical for effective conflict management and performance in the work place. He explained that effective conflict management and high

performance in the workplace requires people who have a solid foundation not only in literacy skills, computations but also in personal qualities such as responsibilities, self-esteem, self-control, sociability, self-management, integrity and honesty, all of which are predicated an emotional intelligence.

Suffice it to say that with emotional intelligence, there is tendency for an individual worker to maintain an experimentally-induced positive mood, which has obvious implications for improving conflict-handling behaviour and prevent industrial conflict.

Communication is another skill suspected to have influence on conflict-handling behaviour of workers. Communication per se is the total process by which one person shares and imparts information on other person so that both of them clearly understood each other (Johnson, 2001). As a social being, every man plays many roles in life such as parents, workers, union leaders, friends, boss and many others. It is, however, noteworthy that in all these roles, there is one skill that is extensively used all through life and that is communication. Perhaps this is why communication skill is considered as the bedrock of other competences that helps an individual to build good relationship with others.

Communication skill is also described as the ability to share knowledge, ideas and feelings effectively with the reception of feedbacks (Johnson, 2001). Southam (2006) puts it more succinctly when he described communication skills as comprising literacy, verbal skills and listening skills. This pre-supposes that effective communicator is expected to possess basic skills in writing, speaking, active listening and interpersonal communication.

The inference can be made, therefore that for an average worker to be able to interact well with others and manage interpersonal conflict effectively, he/she needs basic communication skills. This deduction found support of Trapaus and Gettings (1979) who averred that improved communication skill sustain industrial peace and harmonious relationships among workers generally. Ajala (2003) corroborated this position when he said good communication is one of the key skills to be acquired in peace education for successful conflict resolution.

Bakare (1992) echoed the same view when he posited that male workers tend to exhibit more aggressive behaviour than female due to lack of communication skills on the part of the male workers. In a similar study that investigated communication skill and conflict resolutions strategy of workers, McDowell (1990) as cited in Akintayo (2005) observed that due to lack of interpersonal communication skill, male negotiator tends to express its opinions forcefully and prefers to assume control or dominate argument. Whereas its female counterpart who possesses relative higher degree of communication skill tends to integrate argument and offers trade-offs to reach agreement.

Interpersonal skill on the other hand refers to mental and communications algorithms applied during social communications and interactions in order to reach certain effects or results (Wikipedia, 2006). In other words, it is the ability to effectively interact with others. Seneca (2006) observed that interpersonal skill enables people within the workplace to work with others harmoniously and efficiently thereby reducing interpersonal conflicts.

In consonance with the position of Seneca (2006) on interpersonal skill, Okurame (2000) affirms that interpersonal skills of people influence what they say and how they say it hence it affects their relationship with others positively or negatively. The implication of this is that without good interpersonal skill, an individual worker may not achieve much at work irrespective of other competences he may possess. Okurame (2000) reiterated that lack of interpersonal skill is the cause of interpersonal conflict and social problems that militate against the effectiveness and efficiency of an average Nigerian worker.

Based on the literature reviewed, this study examined the extent to which conflict-handling behaviour of workers in oil sector is predicted by emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill.

Three objectives were generated for this study:

(i) To examine the composite effects of emotional intelligence, communications skill and interpersonal skill on conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers.
(ii) To ascertain the relative effect of emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill on conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers.
(iii) To determine the relationship between the independent variables (emotional intelligence, communication and interpersonal skills) and the conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers.
Consequent on the objectives of the study, three research questions were raised and answered.
(iv) What is the joint effect of emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill on conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers?
(v) What is the contribution of each of emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill to the total variance in conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers?
(vi) What is the relationship between the independent variables (emotional intelligence, communication and interpersonal skills) and conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers?

## METHODOLOGY

### Design and participants

A descriptive survey design of ex-post facto was adopted for this study. A sample size of 610 workers cutting across the top, middle and low management cadres was randomly selected from oil organizations across the country on proportional basis. The oil organizations comprise six major marketers and four independent

**Table 1.** Regression analysis on the joint effect of emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill on conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers.

| Variables | Sum of squares | df | Mean square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 4372.094 | 3 | 1457.365 | 55.448 | 0.000 |
| Residual | 15927.626 | 606 | 26.283 | | |
| Total | 20299.720 | 609 | | | |

R=0 .464, $R^2$= 0.215, Adjusted $R^2$ =0.211, Standard error of the estimate = 5.1267, Significant at $F_{(3, 606)}$= 55.448; $p < 0.05$.

**Table 2.** Relative contribution of emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill to the prediction of conflict-handling behaviours among oil workers.

| Variable | Unstandardized co-efficients B | Std. error | Standardized co-efficients Beta | T | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication skill | 0.179 | 0.021 | 0.318 | 8.529 | 0.000 |
| Interpersonal skill | 0.081 | 0.026 | 0.115 | 3.162 | 0.002 |
| Emotional intelligence | 0.125 | 0.019 | 0.240 | 6.468 | 0.000 |
| Constant | 110.356 | 20.557 | | 4.442 | 0.000 |

Significant at $p < 0.05$.

marketers. The age range of the respondents is between 25 and 45 years with minimum qualification of first school leaving certificates.

### Instrumentation

Four valid and reliable instruments were used. These are: 33-items emotional intelligence scale developed by Schutte et al. (1998); 15-items communication skill scale developed by PsychoTests.com (2008); 16- items interpersonal skill scale developed by Okurame (2001) and 15-items conflict-handling behaviour inventory developed by Rahim (1983). The four scales were pilot tested and their reliability coefficients are 0.78, 0.76, 0.86 and 0.79, respectively. Four point response rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagreed (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) was adopted for the study.

### Procedure

The questionnaires were administered by the researcher with the assistance of three experienced research assistants. A total of 720 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, out of which 653 were returned but 610 copies representing 84.7% were found valid for analysis.

### Method of data analysis

The data gathered were analysed using multiple regression to answer research questions 1 and 2 and correlation matrix was employed to answer research question 3. The result of the analysis provide answers to research questions 1, 2 and 3 which are, respectively, presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

## RESULTS

**Research question 1:** What is the joint effect of emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill on conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers? (Table 1).

The result in Table 1 shows that the three independent variables when taken together yielded a co-efficient of multiple regression R = .464 and adjusted $R^2$ = .211, which implies that 21.1% per cent of the total variance in conflict-handling behaviour of oil workers is accounted for by the combination of the three independent variables.

The Table further established that the joint contribution of the independent variables did not occur by chance as it produced F- ratio value of 55.448, significant at 0.05 alpha level. This lends credence to the effectiveness of the three independent variables in predicting conflict-handling behaviours among oil workers.

**Research question 2:** What is the relative contribution of emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill to the total variance in conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers?

The result on Table 2 shows that all the independent variables separately made significant contribution to the prediction of conflict-handing behaviour of oil workers. For instance, communication skill has a relative significant effect of B = .179; t = 8.529; p < 0.05; interpersonal skill has a separate significant effect of B =.081; t = 3.162; P > 0.0; while emotional intelligence has a relative effect of B = .125; t = 6.468; p < 0.05. Though all the three independent variables made significant relative contribution, the result on the Table 2 revealed that communication skill is the most potent predictor of conflict-handling behaviour among oil workers in Nigeria.

**Research question 3:** What is the relationship between the independent variables and the criterion variable?

**Table 3.** Correlation matrix of relationship between the independent variables and the conflict-handling behaviour of oil workers (N = 610).

| Variable | Conflict- handling behaviour | Emotional intelligence | Communication skill | Interpersonal skill |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conflict handling behaviour | 1.000 | | | |
| Emotional intelligence | 0.314** | 1.000 | | |
| Communication skill | 0.387** | 0.238** | 1.000 | |
| Interpersonal skill | 0.146** | -0.010 | 0.108** | 1.000 |

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

The result of the correlation analysis in Table 3 shows that there are significant ($p<0.01$) positive relationships between the predictors and the criterion variable. For example, emotional intelligence significantly correlated with conflict-handling behaviour (r = 0.314**), communication skill correlated significantly with conflict-handling behaviour (r = .387**) and interpersonal skill and conflict-handling behaviour were also significantly correlated (r= 0.146**).

Also, the result in Table 3 confirms the result in Table 2 that presented communication skill as the most potent predictor because in Table 3, the highest relationship is between communications skill and conflict-handling behaviour (r= 0.387**).

## DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the analysis especially on research question one indicated that the three independent variables namely emotional intelligence, communication and interpersonal skills jointly predict the criterion variable. The predictors made significant joint contribution of 21.1% (adjusted $R^2$ = 0.211) to the variance of the dependent variable. Also, the result produced F- ratio value of 55.448, which implies that the joint contribution of the three predictor variables did not occur by chance instead the F- ratio value lends credence to the effectiveness of the three independent variables in predicting the conflict-handling behaviour of oil workers. The outcome of this multiple regression analysis found support of Debra and James (1997), Goleman (1998), Salovey and Mayer (1990), Aremu (2007), Animashaun (2007), Adeyemo and Ogunyemi (2007) and Hammed (2002) that emotional intelligence, communication skill and interpersonal skill are part of the ten core life skills that empower individual workers to maintain productive interpersonal relationships with others at workplace thereby promoting peaceful and harmonious work environment.

The result of the multiple regression analysis on the relative contribution of the independent variables equally revealed that each of three independent variables significantly predict the dependent measures except that communication skill turns out to be the most potent predictor of the three independent variables. Similarly, the result of the correlation matrix on the relationship between the independent variables and the criterion variable showed that each of the independent variables significantly ($p<0.01$) correlated with the dependent measure and that communication skill has the highest significant relationship (r =0.387).This result is in line with the report of Adeyemo and Ogunyemi (2007) that an objective measure of emotion management skills is associated with a tendency to maintain an experimentally induced positive mood which obviously has implication for effective conflict-handling behaviour.

Also, the result of the present study is in consonance with the report of Okurame (2001) and Seneca (2006) that interpersonal skill enables people within the workplace to interact with others harmoniously and efficiently thereby reducing interpersonal conflict. This result that presented communication skill as the most potent predictor conforms to the study of Ajala (2003) which indicated that communication skill is one of the key skills required for successful conflict resolution. The result equally synchronized that of Johnson (2001) and Southam (2006) that communication skill provided the bedrock for many other competences that are important for effective conflict resolution in the work place.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study showed clearly that the three psychosocial factors significantly correlated with the conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers in Nigeria. Therefore, government and employers of labour in the oil sector could consider the these factors when designing an intervention training programme aimed at enhancing the conflict-handling behaviours of oil workers. By so doing, industrial peace and harmonious working relationships among the oil workers could be sustained.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended that an intervention training programme on the three identified skills (emotional intelligence, communication skill, and interpersonal skill) be organized by government and other employers of labour in the oil sector for their workers in the sector to enhance their conflict-handling behaviour and consequently reduce the rate of

interpersonal and inter-group conflict among the oil workers.

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