A Three Cultures Model Approach to Understanding Organizational Communication: A

Case Study of Multicultural Organizations

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This dissertation titled
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Abstract

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A Three Cultures Model Approach to Understanding Organizational Communication: A Case Study of Multicultural Organizations

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Organizational members exist in circumstances that fundamentally shape norms for acceptable behavior. At the same time, the Three Cultures Model developed by Gardenswartz, Rowe, Digh, and Bennett (2003) reminds us that an individual’s national culture and personal culture work in conjunction with organizational culture to influence communication style. In the case of multicultural organizations (MCOs), the cultural differences that exist among organizational members can certainly be sites for creativity and learning, but they can also be sources for misunderstanding and the emergence/exacerbation of conflict.

Unfortunately, the tendency within the extant literature is to emphasize one element of culture (adopting a macro level perspective focusing on the culture of the organization or the national cultures of the employees or, alternatively, adopting a micro level perspective focusing on the personal cultures of individual employees) rather than appreciating how organizational culture, national culture, and personal culture work together in influencing behavior and sense-making (Weick, 1995).

This research seeks to address a gap in current research by employing the Three Cultures Model in a case study examination of communication and conflict styles within a multicultural organization. The case study approach was adopted due, in part; to the
advantage that such an approach has in providing an opportunity to understand the perceptions and actions of individuals in context. In this research, I focus in particular on the role that culture (organizational culture, national culture, personal culture) plays in the meanings that organizational members construct to explain each other’s behaviors and reactions in situations they define as involving conflict.

Findings of the study supported the need for scholars and practitioners to adopt a holistic approach (three cultures model) when studying intercultural related issues in organizations.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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The completion of this dissertation has been a rather long journey. This was due, in part, to the different roles I played during this journey. I was a father, a part time teacher, student, mentor, and a full time worker who worked and lived with students in the Residence halls. I believe many of my friends and colleagues questioned whether I would ever finish my dissertation? As stated earlier, the journey has not just been long. It has been tumultuous with family and health concerns including the financial burden of having three other college dependents. In addition, I also experienced the writer’s block, lost a few jump drives with my academic data and faced a lot of stress managing students. I also experienced what I refer to as a graduate student’s nightmare. My initial advisor and two of my committee members left the institution within twelve months. This resulted in changing my dissertation topic.

My dissertation has always been a priority, but sometimes, other priorities rear their heads during any journey. During my proposal stages, I decided to pursue an MBA degree based on my future intentions. Fortunately, I successfully completed that milestone. I have run the race no matter how long and have finished with the help of many others. However, due to space constraints, I will mention a few who played significant roles during my journey and kept me sane.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The theme of conflict has been part of the order of nature and has been with humans from time past. As a result, the phenomenon has been studied by scholars and philosophers in almost every discipline (Rahim, 2001). For example, classical philosophers such as Plato (427–347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) wrote about the need for social order in societies. Hegel (1770–1831) focused on how every idea bears its opposing idea and the importance for a synthesis (third doctrine) of the opposing ideas to be developed as an antidote moving forward. John Dewey (1957) posited that conflict was the gadfly to human thoughts because, when faced with conflict, we use our intelligence to adapt to the changes confronting us. For Charles Darwin (1809–1882), “all nature was at war, one organism with another, or with an external nature” (quoted in Hyman, 1966, p. 29).

This classical overview of conflict highlights the importance of the phenomenon and also explains why most schools of organizational thought, from Weber’s bureaucracy and scientific management, to open systems theory, among many others, recognize the inherent complications of human organization and its concomitant conflicts. The importance of studying conflict in organizations cannot, therefore, be over-emphasized. According to Jaffee (2001), organizational conflicts create core tensions that consistently evolve anytime humans are faced with managing their mutual interdependencies within organizational structures.

Research on conflict emphasizes the importance of how conflict is managed in organizations since that influences individual and group functioning (Gelfand, Leslie, & Keller, 2007). Over the last fifty years, a variety of theories have expounded diverse
conflict management styles and their underlying dimensions (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964), and a number of measures have been developed and validated to assess individuals’ conflict management styles (e.g., De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001). Some research has examined predictors of different conflict management strategies, including personality (e.g., Golec & Federico, 2004), social motives (e.g., De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwan, 2000), and culture (e.g., De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008), just to mention a few.

When studying conflict management within organizations, it is important to note that workers exist in circumstances that fundamentally shape norms for acceptable behavior. Even though each worker might have individual preferences for different conflict management styles (Rousseau & Fried, 2001), these preferences are often influenced by their national culture (Hofstede, 1991). However organizations, and not individuals, provide or create situations that determine valued or normative ways to manage conflict (Johns, 2006; O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996). This view, endorsed by Weick (1995), posits that employees often share attitudes and perceptions of the environment through attraction, selection, and socialization which, in turn, reinforces the development of distinct conflict cultures in organizations.

Consequently, this study seeks to emphasize the need for a macro level approach to multicultural organizational conflict management by using the three cultures model (Gardenswatz, Rowe, Digh, & Bennett, 2003). This model takes into consideration the effect of organizational members’ national, organizational, and personal cultures on their conflict management styles. I argue that, until this approach is adopted on a much larger
scale, communication scholars, as well as other stakeholders in the study of organizational behavior, will continue to advance inadequate explanations of the mundane conflicts that occur within Multicultural Organizations (MCOs).

The Three Cultures Model

The Three Cultures Model, developed by Gardenswartz et al., (2003) was based on the premise that people often find it difficult to distinguish between cultural norms and personality differences. Two individuals might exhibit similar behaviors but those behaviors might spring from different values possessed by the two individuals. Attempting to discourage cultural stereotypes, the Three Cultures Model illustrates the existence and inter-relationship of three cultural dimensions, namely national culture, organizational culture, and personal culture. National culture was defined by Gardenswartz et al., (2003) as “the shared understanding that comes from the integration of beliefs, values, attitudes, and known behaviors that have formed the heritage of a nation state;” organizational culture as “the integration of an institution’s widely shared beliefs and values and its guiding philosophy as frequently espoused in its vision, mission and value statements;” and, personal culture as “the integration of an individual’s traits, skills and personality formed within the context of his or her ethnic, racial, familial and educational environments” (p. 65). The Three Cultures Model is primarily based on Adler’s (1991) cultural synergy model and Casimir’s (1999) third culture model. The aforementioned models come together to provide the theoretical frame for this study.
Theoretical Framework

Critical humanist scholars (like Habermas, 1929-2007) have, since the Frankfurt School era, endeavored to work toward clarifying ways in which human beings can rise above the larger social frameworks that construct cultural identities in intercultural settings (Martin & Nakayama, 2008). The critical humanist paradigm acknowledges that multicultural communication research should be more relevant to everyday lives, and that theorizing and research should be definitely based in experience. Experience is not only relevant to, but should facilitate the success of everyday multicultural interactions. This concept is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed and emphasizes the voluntary characteristic of human behavior (Burrell & Morgan, 1988). From this perspective, a fast growing body of literature examines communication issues within the construction of cultural identity.

Radical structuralists, on the other hand, concentrate on structural relationships within a realist social world (Burrell & Morgan, 1988) emphasizing the significance of the structures and the material conditions that guide and constrain the possibilities of cultural contact, multicultural communication, and cultural change. Within this paradigm, the possibilities for changing multicultural relations rest largely upon the structural relations imposed by the dominant structure (Mosco, 1996). The constraints posed by the larger structures are usually overlooked in more traditional multicultural communication research. Critical researchers fill this gap by focusing on important structural and contextual dynamics, but provide less insight on multicultural communication at an interpersonal level (Martin & Nakayama, 1999).
Critical humanist researchers, and the advocates of critical humanism, primarily perceive communication as a social lubricant and pay particular attention to verbal and nonverbal interactions, knowing that these messages can either directly or indirectly have serious implications for one’s self or public image (Burke, 1955). They believe that the accuracy of the information can sometimes be of less importance than the immediate social implications. For example, in my country, Ghana, when people are invited to an event, the one inviting expects a positive answer from the invited indicating a desire to attend the event even if the invitee and, in some cases, the one doing the inviting know that the former will not be present.

According to Hall (2005), communication from the social lubricant perspective is highly rated and also considered potentially dangerous. He contended that communication must be treated carefully and with respect and not as “a neutral container that a person uses as a tool to convey his or her thoughts” (p. 43). Hall (2005) postulated on two common perspectives (the monolithic perspective and the reflexive force perspective) that support why a communicative approach is preferred. The monolithic perspective assumes that human behavior can be explained using a causal model. Based on this model, human beings are socialized such that, given the right motivation and situation, “they will interact in consistent and predictable ways” (p. 56). This perspective also assumes that causal relationships are universally true. From this viewpoint, culture is perceived as a causal force that determines how we communicate based on how one’s culture establishes one’s worldview, values, and norms. I question this view of a causal connection between one’s culture and how one communicates because it is not only
stereotypical but also supports national cultural determinism (McSweeney, 2002). Again, by upholding this view, human agency is removed.

The reflexive perspective, according to Hall (2005), assumes that the relationship between culture and communication is based on sense making. Sense making is used to “account for what has happened in the past, to develop a shared understanding of the present, and to plan and coordinate actions for the future” (p. 56). The disparity across cultures, in terms of worldviews, norms, and values, can complicate the communication process; yet, the disagreements that ensue only help the communicators make sense of the world (Hall, 2005).

The reflexive perspective also assumes that the relationship between cultural forms and communication is situational rather than the same for all. As a result, a behavioral norm, zealously guarded by an individual or a group, might very well be dishonored based on particular circumstances. For example, the norm in Ghanaian classrooms is for students to stand whenever an instructor enters the classroom and to always address the instructor using his or her title. The custom in the United States is different. Here, instructors are oftentimes called by their first names. I had to break my “class norms” to avoid making a fool of myself. According to Hall (2005), “if we ignore the situational nuances, then community-based norms, ways of speaking . . . become reified into stereotypes that can distort and complicate intercultural interactions” (p. 57). The monolithic perspective invariably turns people into cultural robots who have no agency and who lack “sophisticated reasoning” (p. 57). My choice of the third culture model was based on my contention that the reflexive model best represents how
organizational workers communicate in a multicultural setting. Like the reflexive model, the third culture model is situational because it not only considers one’s national culture but the organizational and personal cultures of the individual. How workers communicate might not only depend on their national culture but also on the culture within the organization.

**Third Culture Model**

The term “third culture,” as is relevant to this research, was introduced by Useem, Useem, and Donghue (1963) and, was further developed by Hussein (1981). This phenomenon occurs when persons operating across differing societies create a common “third culture.” Hussein (1981) studied American and non-Western students from a US graduate school of business. His research supported the idea of the existence of a “third culture” in which people can associate across societies for the purpose of engaging in a common enterprise. His model was an attempt to bridge the culture of the society in which the organization operates, and the participants’ own cultures. Graen and Hui (1996) used the term “third culture” in their effort to create a compromise between two distinct cultural practices. The authors believed that a third culture reflected the basic characteristics of the cultures of both business partners, and that what emerged in the process was a synthesized culture. Graen and Wakabayashi (1994) pointed out that a third culture, in its attempt to bridge two cultures, brings compromise between different cultural practices.

Casmir (1992) took a different approach when defining his version of third culture. For Casmir, a third culture develops as a result of actions of community
members in establishing their own frameworks, value systems, and communication systems for the purposes of survival, mutual growth, and enjoyment of life experiences. Adler (1980, 1991) proposed a “Synergistic Culture Model” which was another attempt to negotiate between two cultures. Comparable to Casmir’s model in some ways, Adler’s approach recognized both similarities and differences between two or more nationalities comprising an international organization. The synergistic culture model tried to build a new international organizational culture based on the national cultures of both employees and clients (Adler, 1980) and is what I propose as the basis for studying multicultural organizations.

**Multicultural Organizations**

While most organizations deal with an environment and with internal differentiation, multicultural organizations (MCOs) often link departmental differentiation to a very culturally and institutionally diverse environment. For example, the sub-units of an MCO must compete with societal differences in employee diversity that are of a far greater magnitude than typically exists in purely domestic organizations (Peterson & Thomas, 2007). The employee diversity brings about cultural characteristics which are often reflected in profiles of values or other cognitive characteristics normally found among individuals in a society (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007). The above mentioned differences are represented in a body of comparative literature that identifies national differences in the structure of values and cultural norms (Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Doeringman, & Gupta, 2004; Inglehart, 1990, 1997; Schwartz, 1992); structures of roles, rules, and norms (Smith, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2002); systems of
beliefs about causal relationships (Leung et al., 2002); and informal institutions of other sorts (Kostova & Roth, 2002). While recognizing cultural differences within nations (e.g., Lenartowicz & Roth, 2001), international comparative studies continue to suggest that multinationals encounter an even more culturally varied context than do most domestic organizations (Peterson & Thomas, 2007).

Hart (2000) examined how conflicts evolved within organizations and enumerated six causes. For the purposes of this research, I will list only four of those causes. First, he wrote about how incompatible goals between individuals or groups of individuals within an organization might cause conflict. Second, he mentioned how different personal values of workers could cause conflict. He argued that, in most MCOs, it was apparent, based on the organization’s hiring processes that, workers would have different personal values. As a result, the organizational climate might have a relatively high potential for conflict. Third, power distribution at work could be another source of conflict. Considering the divergent worldviews of employees within MCOs, the interpretation given to power probably varies, and that variation can lead to conflict. Lastly, the existence of “unpredictable” policies within the organization can also trigger conflict. I have emphasized the word “unpredictable” because of its relative connotation. A policy that might seem compatible to one group might seem incompatible to another. The relatively high cultural variation found in Syntel International and the Mid-Western University, the sites for the research reported in this dissertation, has the potential for feeding conflict and, thus, influenced my choice of these institutions as the sites for this research.
**Brief Overview of Institutions**

Syntel is a multinational organization with a strong corporate culture. The parent company was founded in 1866 and employs more than 280,000 people in factories in more than 100 countries throughout the world. Over a third (33.9%) of its workforce is located in Europe, 38% in the Americas, and 28.1% in Asia, Oceania, and Africa. Syntel has a reputation for an engaged and diverse global workforce that is reliant on good development policies and people management with the active support of line managers. Syntel’s principles and continuous improvements in environmental and occupational health and safety management have also contributed to measures that increase employee engagement and their health and wellbeing.

Syntel Africa, with its head office in Accra, Ghana, was the chosen site, herein referred to as site A. The office was opened in Ghana in 1957 and has been in continuous operation ever since. In 2002, this office also became the hub for Oceania and Africa.

Syntel’s greatest assets are its human resources which come from a wide geographic area. Their website states: “We are committed to diversity and strive to hire the best brains from across the globe. Our staff are diverse in many respects, including gender, nationality, race, culture, education and experience and fully represent our member countries” (Syntel website).

Like Syntel, the university chosen is particular about the diversity of its workforce. More than thirty percent of its workforce comes from different countries, with academic professors in the majority. The university started in the early eighteenth century.
Emphasizing the need for diversity in the recruitment of an organization’s workforce has serious consequences, key among which is conflict. This is particularly true for the above-mentioned organizations, where their members are faced with cultural differences, and where their workers often have to act in contexts with high conflict potential (Euwema & Van Emmerik, 2007). The high conflict comes about as a result of variations in communication styles, diverse orientations to life, different concepts about reality and social norms, and assorted rules of etiquette, to mention a few. This array of differences among workers is the cause of most conflicts in MCOs. However, in spite of the gravity of this phenomenon, the issue of intercultural conflicts within MCOs continues to be downplayed, not only in organizations but by society at large (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). The importance of cultural factors and cultural differences for the functioning of MCOs at all levels and the implications of such factors both for organizations and for individuals working in them have been ignored (Albert, 1992).

**Statement of Purpose**

This dissertation responds to the needs of multicultural organizations to react constructively to multicultural organizational conflicts, and to shy away from traditional studies where multiculturalism within organizations is considered an endstate rather than an evolving social structure. The growing diversity within organizations, especially multicultural organizations, and their consequent multicultural conflicts underscored the need for this study. This dissertation examines and assesses the influence of cultural differences among workers within multicultural organizations and how these differences shape workers’ conflict management styles; considering that any individual’s disposition
is informed by his/her primary and secondary socializations (Berger & Luckman, 1966). With respect to communication in groups and organizational contexts, culture shapes our interaction goals, which, in turn, has implications for our styles of interaction, our interpretation of behaviors and communication, and our management of cultural conflict (Hofstede, 1996; Kozan & Ergin, 1998; Weaver, 1998; Zorn & Violanti, 1996).

With conflict being a natural part of the daily activities of any workplace, the issue of intercultural conflict becomes especially pertinent when people from different cultural orientations interact. Complications often arise due to a differing array of needs and to differing conflict negotiation styles (Ting-Toomey, 1988). As established, MCOs, to say the least, are the most vulnerable. Apart from any practical and technical problems MCOs encounter, national psychology and characteristics (a cultural phenomenon) frequently interfere with the operation of the organization (Sharif, 2005).

Against this backdrop, this dissertation research particularly sought to understand whether workers’ conflict styles in an organization were influenced in any way by any or all of the three cultural factors, namely: the organization’s culture, the nationality of the organization’s members, and the personal culture (self-construal) of those members. I used a communication perspective for this study with the hope of encouraging communication scholars to focus on the cultural ramifications of communication in multicultural organizations (Deetz, 1994).

**Communication and Cultural Conflicts**

The process of communication within organizations has been studied by sociologists, psychologists, and communication scholars. Stohl (2001) explained that “multicultural organizations are at the intersection of diverse communicative, cultural,
and social practices” (p. 235). It is evident that organizational communication occurs in organizations located in every country of the world. However, national and regional cultural patterns affect and influence the nature, extent, and consequences of communication in these organizations (Albert, 1992). Focusing on a communication perspective was therefore appropriate for this research.

According to Wall and Callister (1995), the effects of communication on conflict are double-edged. Less interaction among colleagues, on the one hand, results in low knowledge of others and could emphasize coordination difficulties leading to conflict (Pondy, 1967). On the other hand, extensive communication between one worker and a colleague is usually perceived as a potential source for misunderstandings and, subsequently, conflict (Putnam & Poole, 1987).

Likewise, Triandis and Albert (1987) wrote about the lack of awareness or marginalization of the difficulties involved in communicating within a multicultural organization. These difficulties could, according to Triandis and Albert, culminate in open hostility. Hammer (2005) wrote about how linguistic and cultural barriers often carried evaluative and affective consequences for interactants in any intercultural context. Consequently, it became vital for organizations, especially heterogeneous organizations, to pursue effective intercultural communication that served to establish and maintain favorable intergroup relations (Dodd, 1995; Gudykunst, 1987; Hall, 1976). Failure in this bid could lead to unprecedented organizational conflicts which could then inhibit productivity (Hall, 2005).
The findings of this study are expected not only to raise the awareness of multicultural conflict as endemic, neglected, and harmful but to also encourage scholars and practitioners alike to recognize the potential harm that neglect causes to multicultural organizations in particular and to organizations in general. In the following pages, I discuss the rationale for the study and try to establish some boundaries.

**Rationale for Study**

Sharif (2005) observed, “our contemporary problems are still rooted in the interpersonal relationships of the people who make up our world, and so it is particularly appropriate to examine the dynamics of those interactions” (p. x). Finding effective ways for organizations to manage the increasing heterogeneity in their workforces and consumer bases are essential (Ashkanasy et al., 2002) because “conflict is inevitable among humans especially with different attitudes, values, beliefs and skills” (Rahim, 2001, p. 1). Rahim’s quotation underlies the need for communication researchers to gird their loins with respect to multicultural issues and to do so innovatively. This is partly because culture is not a dreadful structure or an expendable platform. Rather, conflict plays a fundamental role in human existence and has the potential to serve as an important resource in transforming multicultural conflict (LeBaron, 2003).

The need to address this phenomenon became more pertinent with modern developments in the world economy. The dawn of the global economy and the rise in global organizational competitiveness led to a growing number of workers traversing cultural boundaries (Onwumechili, Nwosu, Jackson II, & James-Hughes, 2003). These workers, now more than ever, have to deal with greater levels of workplace diversity
concomitant with apparent challenges, such as language barriers, foreign customs and practices, and cultural variations in verbal and nonverbal communication (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Writing more than thirty years ago, Triandis (1977) noted that the dominancy of communication difficulties in multicultural organizations was oftentimes downplayed, resulting in the marginalization of that phenomenon. For many, perhaps most organizations, that situation remains true today. This practice of marginalizing cultural differences rather than treating them as significant can culminate in open hostilities and dysfunctional conflicts, especially when, because of cultural differences, the interacting persons have different assumptions about appropriate and desirable behaviors in particular situations (Albert, 1983; Albert & Triandis, 1985; Triandis, 1977).

Albert (1992) postulated that increasing diversity had made it imperative that research in organizational communication broaden its base and scope and become multicultural. This statement remains relevant in the 21st century as shown by Gardenswartz et al. (2003), who posited that the issue of global diversity had become extremely important in modern times, to the extent that, “in the new borderless economy, culture doesn’t matter less; it matters more” (p. 72). What we are faced with is our relationship with individuals and groups who might be completely alien to us. These relationships could become more challenging if we confined ourselves to the same space as “aliens” with a common purpose (Hammer, 2005).

Christian, Porter, and Moffit (2006) added their voice to the phenomenon indicating that the study of conflict and diversity within groups, ranging from small workgroups to multicultural organizations, had gained an increasingly important focus.
for contemporary research. (This was not surprising considering the increase in workgroup diversity in organizations in general, and in multicultural organizations in particular.) Current cultural and demographic factors, such as globalization and multiculturalism, have changed the composition of organizational work forces, such that they are more varied than in the past (Christian et al., 2006) warranting the need for more in-depth studies into multicultural conflicts.

Again, the need for such studies is pertinent considering that, when two or more social entities come into contact with one another in the pursuance of common objectives, their relationship can invariably become incompatible or inconsistent, especially when they have partially exclusive behavioral preferences or when they have different attitudes, values, beliefs, and skills (Rahim, 2001). This incompatibility and/or inconsistency among workgroup members, if unacknowledged, could result in conflict because “we live in a nation and a world of cultural diversity; miscommunication stems not from that diversity or difference per se, but from flawed response to it” (Weiss, 1993, p. 207). This quotation succinctly identifies a pandemic facing MCOs today, namely the issue of multicultural conflicts and the role of communication.

It is indeed true that our present world has grown rather small, and that reality has come with a higher incidence of or potential for conflict in our mundane activities. The situation becomes more alarming when we consider the contestation of multiplied voices with spatial limitations. According to Brew and Cairns (2004), “the organizational implications of diversity mean that individuals who come from different cultures and possess different language competence levels will require specific strategies that can help
them achieve effective communication during business interactions” (p. 157). In my opinion, it might be necessary to look beyond business interactions and into intra-organizational communication to ensure that the communication process is effective, bearing in mind the reflexive connection between communication and culture. By “effective communication,” I refer to the attainment of competence in communication that will help forestall the incidence of dysfunctional conflicts within organizations.

My reading of existing literature on organizations and organizational communication indicates that most studies of multicultural communication use similar lenses, such as individualism/collectivism, culturally homogeneous versus heterogeneous groups, high versus low context (Hofstede, 1991; Kaushal, & Kwantes, 2006; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Triandis, 1989), and the like, to identify aspects on which cultures are similar or different. A significant problem most of these studies have had is the consideration of culture as an “organized orderly endstate” (Casmir, 1999, p. 91). Coupled with the aforementioned problems are the rather ubiquitous bifurcations in classifications, namely; individualism/collectivism, homogeneous/heterogeneous groups, and high/low context.

According to Casmir (1999), almost all intercultural communication researchers have followed this rather “geographical” (emphasis mine) trend. “Geographical” in this context refers to the situation where workers’ behaviors at the workplace are often related to their country of origin. Consequently, most researchers in the discipline have, in my opinion, overly relied on and used lenses that privilege the bifurcations in their research. Consequently, I argue that how workers negotiate their conflicts is not only contingent on
the bifurcations (national cultures) but also on their self-construals and the culture of the particular organization to which they belong. Goaded by the already stated premise, I embarked on this “journey” with the view to highlight two major constraints in the study of multicultural communication. To do that, I operationalize my definition of culture.

**Culture as an Endstate**

Culture has been one of the most difficult, yet richly connotative concepts, to define. As a result, there are varied definitions of the word. For the purposes of this study, I highlight a few popular definitions. The British anthropologist, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1924), defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (n. p.). Gudykunst and Kim (1992) also conceived of culture as “systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people” (p. 13) while Hofstede and Hofstede (2004) defined it as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 4).

These few selected definitions have a general theme that runs through them, as well as through other definitions not mentioned. First, it can be deduced that culture is acquired by people and that these people acquire these practices because they are members of a society (collective phenomenon). Second, I posit that culture is complex because it is not only about its practices but also its ability to program our mind collectively. Levine, Park, and Kim (2007) defined it simply as “something that is shared among people belonging to the same socially defined and recognized group” (p. 206). Based on my understanding of numerous cultural definitions, I will simply posit that
culture makes us who we are as human beings. My stance makes culture fluid because, as human beings, we are dynamic and highly susceptible to change. However, studies involving culture have not considered the dynamism I write about.

Culture has generally, for some reason, been measured by scholars from various disciplines as an endstate rather than a dynamic process (Belay, 1993; Casmir, 1992, 1999; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; McPhail, 1996; Rodriguez, 2002; Said, 2001).

According to Casmir (1999), whenever social scientists bring their own models and expectations to studying events or interactions within an organization, their reports seem to be biased towards their own expectations. Social scientists are additionally blinded by their terministic screens (see also Burke, 1969).

Measuring culture as an endstate diminishes two essential assumptions about human nature and a person’s environment. The first (linked to the cultural environments of communication) is that multicultural interactions are usually irregular, considering the unrelated sets of expectations and definitions (Smith, 1996). The second essential assumption that is diminished is that the nature of humans as social beings engenders the need to find ways of making sense of the differences among all these diverse formulations (Hall, 2005; Toulmin, 1987). Consequently, the quest for dialogue becomes a possible driving force in intercultural communication events made possible by human instinct. Supporting this assertion, Smith (1996) noted that human beings are linked at any given moment in time by, and in, complex social structures. To understand these complex structures adequately, intercultural communication scholars need to find out how and why social structures are constructed, thereby considering the process of their
development and not merely their endstate (Casmir, 1999). Taking into consideration the dynamism of cultures, it becomes difficult to rationalize mere description of endstates, which pay little or no attention to the central need for change and adaptation, and the communication processes leading to them (Casmir, 1999; Hall, 2005). By focusing on outcomes or endstates, scholars make it easy for deviations from cultural or social norms to be considered only as disruptive or destructive.

More so, allowing the status quo of using Hofstede’s lenses (which pay little or no attention to the central need for change and adaptation, and the communication processes leading to change or adaptation) to describe or determine individual actions or reactions needs to change; hence, the need for this study. The simplistic dichotomies that have evolved from such studies have seemingly led to most studies repeatedly demonstrating how individuals from low-context cultures deal with each other differently than is true of interactants from high context cultures (Hofstede, 1980). These dichotomies or theoretical models do not clarify or help us understand how, why, and when individuals overcome their differences or manage their conflicts in authentic intercultural dialogic interactions (Triandis, 1990). Neither do they explain what is involved when individuals from two culturally divergent groups have to work together in answering various challenges (Casmir, 1999).

**Constitutive Nature of Communication**

Again, most research findings on inter-culturalism have rested on theories and, in some cases, research models that have failed to consider the constitutive nature of language even when the constituents in question are culturally diverse (Hall, 2005). This
generalization of culture, or etic approach, has led to situations where human beings are grouped under headings that are more geo-political than cultural. For example, many scholars have referred simply to Americans, the English, Asians, and/or Africans, failing to offer any further distinctions (e.g., to indicate which “Asians” or which “Africans” are being referenced). From this perspective, culture is frequently viewed as a variable, defined a priori by group membership typically at a national level (Hall, 2005; Moon, 1996). This perspective has also included an emphasis on the stable and orderly characteristics of culture. Consequently, social scientists have studied intercultural communication as a relic of cultural comparisons (Casmir, 1992). These studies have been based on a perspective that does not consider the ability of human beings to build or construct communication systems, relationships, and new models for their socio-cultural existence. The aforementioned studies have failed to acknowledge the possibility of human beings going beyond their “assigned” cultural repertoires (Casmir, 1999). These assigned roles have, in many ways, distorted our perceptions of homogeneity and stability. They also have the potential of forcing society to adopt varied positions that restrict “moving toward multiple perspectives that might inform each other in a dialogue of differences” (Dervin, 1991, p. 50).

Similarly, most studies of intercultural or organizational communication have not been based on an understanding of the actual communication processes involved when people from different cultural backgrounds interact and build a communicative event. According to Dewey (1957), when the relationship between human beings and their
environment becomes interrupted by obstacles or conflicts, individuals must use their intelligence to readapt through a change in their accustomed modes of conduct and belief.

Even though readapting takes place under such circumstances in most organizations, research on the subject is sparse (Albert, 1992; Casmir, 1999). The influence of the organizational culture and the agency of the individual worker are taken for granted. Burke (1969) suggested that we have to begin by finding it necessary to create or develop an understanding of one another through the process of negotiating meanings. Similarly, Baxter (1992) wrote about how social reality is polysemous and fluid with meaning constructed in the ongoing negotiated interactions between persons. Human beings, undoubtedly, have the potential for constructing new ways of being and different ways of understanding the world (Hall, 2005). In other words, cultures oftentimes reckon with instability and change, as no culture is inherently stable and homogenous (Rodriguez, 2002). This study is, thus, an attempt to reflect on the “imaginary thresholds” partially caused by the dichotomous labels that have separated workers within organizations and subsequently fostered conflicts (Said, 2001).

Additionally, most research concerning organizational communication, in general, and intercultural organizational communication, in particular, has been “sporadic at best and has differed in terms of the variables investigated, the population studied and the scope of work” (Triandis & Albert, 1987, p.282). Even though this claim was made more than twenty years ago, the situation has not changed. The dearth of conceptual and empirical work in this area continues to be acute. A perusal of most text books on the subject matter (Handbook of Organizational Communication: An Interdisciplinary
Perspective; Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively; The International Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate; Handbook of Organizational Culture & Climate; The Sage Handbook of Organization Studies; The New Handbook of Organizational Communication; Managing Conflict in Organizations, to name a few) have, when using Hofstede’s lenses, concentrated more on inter-organizational issues (evidenced by copious research material on organizational and intercultural communication) rather than intra-organizational communication and conflict within pluralistic multicultural organizations.

Consequently, most American academic journals have lacked articles that examine MCOs in the U.S. or other countries. The paucity of literature in this area has inhibited communication processes and needs to be addressed. Rousseau and Fried (2001), advocating for international comparative research (linked to national differences in cultures and other institutions), argued that the field of organizational research has become more international, giving rise to challenges in transporting social science models from one society to another. It is worth noting that, while all organizations must deal with a physical environment and with internal differentiation, the multicultural context I seek to address links departmental differentiation to a very culturally and institutionally diverse environment.

Moving closer to modern times, recent changes in the economic power of the global community have stimulated an interest in cross-cultural conflict management and encouraged a rather high sense of attention to cultural differences and views within MCOs. An ontological view of this phenomenon will accelerate a better understanding
of cultural differences within that context, leading to increased productivity in emerging organizations.

Lastly, most culturally-focused organizational research had been conducted using university students (see, for example, Altshuler, Sussman, & Kachur, 2003; Bennett, 1986; Dyson, 2000; Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez 2003). By contrast, this study offers a unique and realistic population within multicultural organizations. I acknowledge the existence of numerous studies that have focused on workers within organizations, a typical example being Hofstede’s classic study of national cultures. However, how workers from different nationalities and worldviews negotiate their conflict situations, taking into account national, organizational, and personal culture, has rarely been explored. The influence of multiculturalism within organizations and its toll on organizational output has yet to be fully explored.

**Definition of Key Terms**

*Culture*: Culture makes us who we are as human beings; dynamic. It is a complex whole which includes our knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by mankind as a member of society.

*Multicultural Organization* (MCO): I define a multicultural organization as a unit (either local or international) where employees of varied backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, and experiences can contribute freely, and achieve their own individual and organizational potentials for the benefit of that organization.

*Conflict*: Within this context, I define conflict simply as any disagreement or misunderstanding between two or more individuals.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have highlighted the importance of re-examining the harmful effects of dysfunctional intercultural organizational conflicts on multicultural organizations considering that present organizational trends tilt more towards globalization than ever before. I have argued that, for multiculturalism within organizations to thrive, there should be effective management of intra-organizational conflicts. Addressing dysfunctional conflicts effectively and expediently could not be more pressing (Duryea, 1992), given that resolution of conflicts could help sustain peaceful relations and increase output (Blumberg, 1998).

As earlier indicated, cultural differences, within and across organizations, have often resulted in conflictive communication. This development justifies the need to identify and examine the latent factors within that context. Most scholars have contended that communication strategies, including modes of conflict resolution, can provide an important means of bridging diverse cultural perspectives (Dubinskas, 1992; Gabrielidis, Stephan, Ybarra, Pearson, & Villareal, 1997; Hofstede, 1983; Ting-Toomey, 1991, Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). Based on that premise, it is important to identify and understand the factors (if any) that trigger multicultural conflicts so as to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon.

I propose, through this study, to understand how the conflict style of workers within MCOs is influenced by their national culture, organizational culture, and personal culture. My intention is to promote awareness of the inherent dangers (dysfunctional conflicts) in MCOs caused by cultural differences that are often downplayed or taken for
granted. This study is also intended to change the status quo where workers’ conflict styles are considered to be contingent only on geographically determined bifurcations.

In the following chapter (2), I review related literature and pose the research questions that guide this study. In chapter three, I use a case study approach by interviewing participants from two multicultural organizations; one in the US and the other in Ghana, West Africa. Chapters four and five highlight the findings and discussions of findings. These are followed by limitations and future suggestions.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Intercultural communication scholars have studied the phenomenon of intercultural conflict and written extensively on the subject. Essential factors identified by these scholars have included cultural knowledge and awareness, communication skills, and tolerance for ambiguity. These essential factors strongly affect the favorability of intergroup contact (Giles & Johnson, 1981; Gudykunst, 1987; Lustig & Koester, 1996) leading to a recurring subject in international business: the issue of problematic misunderstandings that evolve as a result of cultural differences in styles of negotiating and handling conflict (Adler, 1986; Adler & Graham, 1989; Hofstede, 1991; Maddox, 1993).

Ting-Toomey (1988) stated that conflict is a natural part of the daily activities of any workplace, but when people from different cultural orientations interact, complicated tensions can arise. This has, as a result, led to numerous studies of cultural diversity in MCOs. However, the most frequently studied cultural characteristics in international management, cross-cultural psychology, and communication, are forms of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Ting-Toomey, 1991).

The “Hofstedian” Paradigm

Two dimensions of cultural variability have had relevance for communication behavior in conflict management. The first of these is the well-researched individualist–collectivist dimension (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Hui, 1988; Triandis, 1995). Here, individualists focus on individual goals, needs, and rights more than community concerns. On the other hand, collectivists value in-group goals and concerns, with
priority given to obligations and responsibilities to the group. The second dimension is
the concept by Hall (1976) of high- and low-context cultures, which speaks directly to
communication style. According to Hall (1976), low-context cultures that value
individualist goals, such as the United States of America (USA), separate person and
issue, are confrontational, and use explicit codes of speech. High context cultures that
value collectivist goals, on the other hand, intermesh person and issue, are indirect, and
rely on contextual cues and situational knowledge. As a result, members of high context
cultures often use embedded references and indirect speech acts. Again, in low-context
cultures, people tend to express emotional information through facial expressions, tone of
voice, and body movements (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 1998). On the flip side, people
who live in high-context cultures tend to suppress or mask their emotions (Wenzhong &
Grove, 1991). Ting-Toomey (1988, 1999) argued that the two cultural dimensions,
(individualist–collectivist dimension and high- versus low-context dimension) are the
keys to differing preferences among workers in MCOs. These workers invariably come
from societies that are familiar with these dimensions and use them to manage conflict
situations.

**Hofstede and National Culture**

Lewis (2006) observed that “the inhabitants of any country possess certain core
beliefs and assumptions of reality which will manifest themselves in [those inhabitants’]
behavior. Culture, in the sense that it represents one’s outlook and worldview, is not,
however, strictly a national phenomenon” (p. xvii). This observation speaks directly to
one of the underlying themes in my dissertation, specifically that, even though national
culture is important with regards to how individuals perceive the world, it is not the sole
determinant of how the world is perceived. I argue for the consideration of other cultural
constructs that influence an individual’s behavior, a move from the status quo where most
studies are grounded exclusively on Hofstede’s (1980) model of national cultures.

Many definitions exist for national culture. In fact, the breadth of scholarship on
the topic has likely led to that definitional variety. Trompenaars (1994) proposed three
main dimensions for national culture: people’s attitudes towards time, their relationships
with others, and their attitudes towards the environment. Like Hofstede, Trompenaars
identified five dimensions of culture: universalism versus particularism, individualism
versus collectivism, neutral versus emotional, specific versus diffuse, and achievement
oriented versus ascription oriented.

Based on the concept of national culture, people within nations exhibit particular
cultural traits that make it easier to distinguish their cultural domains and values. Graen
and Hui (1996) noted that there are two broad categories of differences in cultural values:
nominal differences and systematic differences. While the former refers to specific
phenomena, like language and customs, systematic differences involve fundamental
values, beliefs, and philosophies of social regulation. Hofstede’s study focused on
systematic differences.

For the purposes of this study, I focus on Hofstede’s theory of national cultures, in
large part, because of its popularity and adoption by a majority of scholars in various
disciplines. For example, Trompenaars’ (1994) three cultural dimensions bear
similarities to Hofstede’s dimensions. Like Trompenaars, Ting-Toomey (1988) has also
used the individualistic and collectivistic dimensions in her research on cultural diversity between US and Australian cultures on one hand and the East Asian culture on the other. Most theories of cultural variability use the nation as a unit. This is especially profound in articles and books authored by business scholars. According to Peterson and Thomas (2007), the most frequently studied cultural characteristics in international management and cross-cultural psychology are forms of individualism and collectivism. Many other seminal works on cultural differences, follow the status quo (i.e., use Hofstede’s theory), hence my focus on Hofstede.

Within both management and communication disciplines, there is significant literature which assumes that “each nation has a distinctive, influential and describable ‘culture’ which shapes everything” (Hickson & Pugh, 1995, p. 90). This reality suggests at least a couple of questions that should be explored. First, do nations really have cultures? Second, assuming there are unique national cultures, are those cultures inherent and unchangeable in a country nationals?

Hofstede’s (1980) famous national study was based on the responses of 117,000 personnel from a large American-owned multinational company between the period of 1967 and 1973. They responded to a questionnaire containing items that predominantly examined work-related values. Hofstede’s (1983) research primarily stated that there are four central, “largely independent” (p. 78) dimensions of a national culture and that 40 out of the 66 countries in which he conducted the study could be given a comparative score on each of these dimensions (Hofstede, 1983, 1991, 2001). The first of those dimensions is Power Distance: “the extent to which the less powerful members of
organizations and institutions (like the family) expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 28; Hofstede & Peterson, 2000, p. 401). The second dimension is Uncertainty Avoidance: “intolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 113; Hofstede & Peterson, 2000, p. 401). Third is Individualism versus Collectivism: “the extent to which individuals are integrated into groups” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 51; Hofstede & Peterson, 2000, p. 401). Finally, the fourth dimension is Masculinity versus Femininity: “assertiveness and competitiveness versus modesty and caring” (Hofstede, 1991, pp. 82–83; Hofstede & Peterson, 2000, p. 401).

Hofstede’s dimensions basically posit that our identities are derived, in large part, by our affiliation to a nation state and, that our affiliation to a nation evokes a set of values, attributes, and stereotypes that become rather evident in multicultural environments. Hofstede (2001) defined national culture as the “collective programming of the mind” which distinguished the members of one group or category of people from another. He referred, in many instances, to “common traits” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 19) of the “inhabitants of a particular nation” (Hofstede, 1996, p. 157), implying that individuals within a nation had similar habits. However, he went ahead to indicate that his research did not compare individuals but, rather, looked at “central tendencies” or “national norms” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 253) to determine national traits. Like McSweeney (2002), I find this stance rather contradictory. In my opinion, not considering the agency of the individual is problematic. I posit that it is imperative for personal cultures to be factored into determining behavior irrespective of the context.
McSweeney (2002) again described Hofstede’s characterization of national culture as an absolute distinction between one nation’s culture and that of other nations. This characterization, in many ways, supports “national cultural determinism” (McSweeney, 2002, p. 92). It is worth noting that Hofstede (1980) described nations as sub-culturally heterogeneous where individuals did not all share common subcultures. Yet his theory is based on the premise that all members of a nation share a common national culture. I hypothesize that, if individuals do not all share common subcultures, then it would be expedient for researchers to move away from the “Hofstedian paradigm” (where sub-cultures barely influence developments) to a situation where there is some level of constitutive interplay between different levels and types of cultures (McSweeney, 2002). If allowed, my hypothesis that national culture, organizational culture, and personal culture all influence conflict style among workers in MCOs will be supported.

Hofstede’s definition stresses “collective mental programming”: a phenomenon that is shared with other members of a nation, region, or group. If this definition holds true, then living and working with organizational members over a period of time, and within the same geographic space, should trigger some mental programming and support the need for other cultures, such as organizational culture and the self construal of each organizational member, to be considered as factors.

Additionally, Hofstede’s classification of his values into four “largely independent” dimensions (Hofstede, 1983, p. 78) is, in my view, unrealistic. For example, the vastly contrasting positions of his dimensions have been challenged by other scholars, such as Schwartz (1992). Schwartz (1992) wrote about the existence of
dynamic relations among the dimensions while Triandis (1995) indicated that the dimensions of individualism and collectivism could “coexist and are simply emphasized more or less . . . depending on the situation. All of us carry both individualist and collectivist tendencies” (p. 42).

Most importantly, Hofstede’s dimensions leave out important traits such as coexistence and conflict, key cultural qualities that pervade any multicultural study (McSweeney, 2002). Leaving out any trait of conflict as a dimension strongly motivates this study. Using myself as an example, I have found myself to hold incompatible ideas and/or values under different circumstances. Also, since my sojourn into the United States eight years ago (from Ghana, West Africa), I have been confronted with conflicting situations, either with others or with myself. This is what I found lacking in Hofstede’s work and what engendered this study.

While recognizing cultural differences within nations (Lenartowicz & Roth, 2001), I support Hart’s (2000) assertion that how an individual responds to issues of conflict is contextual. To buttress this point, I will again use myself as an example. My “national” values have changed drastically since I began working in the United States. In my country (Ghana), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues are not entertained nor even tolerated in organizations. However, since I began working with my current organization, I have been a strong advocate (ally) for the LGBT group. In support of the need to consider how contexts influence our discourse, many other international comparative studies continue to suggest that multinationals encounter an
even more culturally varied context than do most domestic organizations (Peterson & Thomas, 2007).

According to Ling, Floyd and Baldridge (2005), culture most frequently appears in studies of functional relationships between Organizational Behavior (OB) variables in MCOs. This is done by hypothesizing differences in how people, working in culturally different national contexts of MCO divisions, respond to the same situation. For instance, the national culture of the location to which an expatriate is assigned can switch the normative frame of reference the expatriate uses for making ethical judgments. In an examination of ethical judgments in decision making, managers working for multinationals on expatriate assignments in Russia responded to some ethical situations differently than did U.S. managers working at home (Spicer, Dunfee, & Bailey, 2004). “The cultural context, within which a manager worked, produced a culturally predictable shift in the frame that managers used for making a judgment” (p. 271), buttressing claims concerning the importance of contextualization in behavioral issues.

Organizational Culture

According to Smircich and Calais (1987), culture is not “a characteristic that an organization has. Rather it represents what an organization is” (p. 233). This statement mirrors my philosophy on organizational culture as a living organism created through the duality of structures (Giddens, 1986), i.e., human agency brought about by interactions among members of the organization and organizational structures set forth by management. Most literature on organizational culture has given different interpretations to what constitutes organizational culture. Schein (1985) defined organizational culture
as “the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered or developed . . . , and which have worked well enough to be considered valid . . . to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel” (p. 385).

In my opinion, Schein’s definition covers the basics in organizational culture and fits the operational definition of this study. Like the earlier cultural definitions, it is a group decision, derived over time, through interactions which have been generally well accepted and authenticated by the group.

It is important to note that most research on organizational culture has been more quantitative than qualitative. Some examples of these include Jones and Jones’ Organizational Norms Opinionnaire (Alexander, 1978); the Organizational Culture Profile (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1991), and the Organizational Climate Questionnaire – Form B (Litwin & Stringer, 1968). These are examples of the many scales that measure organizational culture; however, very few studies are available that examine organizational culture qualitatively (for example, Wang & James, 2005).

A general theme that emerged in my review of the literature, and which is of interest to this study, is the evolution of socio-cultural qualities within organizations which recognize culture as an internal attribute (Smircich, 1983). Organizations are thus treated as social instruments that produce cultural artifacts, such as rituals, legends, and ceremonies (Dandridge, 1983). However, other themes that have emerged characterize organizational culture as a value system promoted by managers (Siehl & Martin, 1984). This paradigm positions management as having the ability to develop and prescribe the culture of their organizations. I do not agree with this school of thought. As earlier
mentioned, I believe organizational culture is a concerted effort of both management and workers (structuration process) that helps productivity.

Of interest to this study was the issue of solidarity proposed by Butler and Earley (2001). According to them, multicultural groups that are nationally homogeneous will need solidaristic organizational cultural levels that support solidarity at the group level to enable efficient productivity. They posit that if organizational cultures within which the groups operate are not supportive, then the groups might not create the necessary group culture needed to achieve optimal growth for their organizations.

**Organizational Conflict**

Organizational conflict is often embedded in perceived differences of opinion or interests where the actions of employees interfere, frustrate, and hinder one another’s actions (Deutsch, 1973; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). This often occurs in the process of organizing people toward a common goal. During the process, individuals have conflict as they coordinate and arrange work patterns and practices. This process is often identified as the constitutive feature of communication (and conflict) in organizations (Deetz, 2001).

Research on organizational conflict has centered around relational and task conflicts. According to Jehn, Bezrukova, and Thatcher (2008), “relational conflicts are disagreements and incompatibilities among group members about issues that are not task related” (p. 208). Task conflicts, on the other hand, are “disagreements among group members’ ideas and opinions about an assigned task. This type of conflict is focused on content related issues” (Jehn et al., p. 180). Like most organizational culture studies,
most research on organizational conflicts has been more quantitative than qualitative; justifying the need for a study that looks at organizational conflict qualitatively. A qualitative study, in this regard, will enable a better description of the phenomenon being studied.

**Personal Culture (Self Construal)**

In my opinion, our personal cultures determine how we live our lives. Nordby (2008) likened personal cultures to the individual’s values which, to him, are not subject to lucid debates about truth and falsity. He argued that subjecting personal values to debates oppresses one’s value meaning and unjustifiably diminishes a person’s individuality and choices. That person’s individuality and preferences are what motivates the way a cultural group live their lives. He continued by stating that one’s personal values are directly related to actions one makes with regard to specific situations (Nordby, 2008). Consequently, understanding an individual’s personal values is not the same as understanding the general values in which one believes. In this research, I refer to self-construal as one’s personal culture.

Markus and Kitayama (1991), original proponents of self-construal theory, refer to the basis of their theory as an individual’s sense of self in relation to others. They identified two main types of self-construal, namely the independent and interdependent types. People with independent self-construal see the self as resolute and separate from interpersonal context. They value self-promotion, a great deal of independence, are assertive, and like to be unique. People with interdependent self-construal, on the other hand, see themselves as more flexible and entangled with the social context. They also
appreciate maintaining group harmony and being part of the team (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Like Hofstede (1987) and Ting-Toomey (1999), Markus and Kitayama (1991) follow the Hofstedian paradigm by indicating that an individual’s dominant self-construal is primarily determined by the cultural contexts of individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). Persons from more collectivist cultures (e.g., African and Hispanic cultures) have historically been influenced by group-oriented cultural values, and thus are inclined to have a more interdependent self-construal, whereas those from more individualistic cultures (e.g., Western European cultures, the United States) are more likely to have been influenced by individual-focused cultural values, and therefore have an inclination to be more independent.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that variations in self-construal lead to important differences in individuals’ psychological experience. They suggested that self-construal shapes cognition (e.g., attention, cognitive elaboration, and representation in memory), emotion (e.g., expression and experience of particular emotions), and motivation (e.g., for cognitive consistency and affiliation) (Singelis, 1994).

It is important to note that this theory has been widely used. The addition of self-construal to the study of intercultural communication has led to much research and revision of theory (Kapoor, Hughes, Baldwin, & Blue, 2003). For example, Ting-Toomey (1988), whose work has centered on the cultural dimension of individualism, collectivism, modified her theory (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001) to include self-construals. In the same vein, Gudykunst (1995) revised his
Anxiety Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory to include self-construal. In spite of these additions, the relationship between self-construal and individualism/collectivism in the research is not certain (Kapoor, Hughes, Baldwin, & Blue, 2003). For instance, research conducted by Park and Levine (1999) did not provide any conclusive links between national culture and self construals. It is necessary at this point to examine the influence of this popular and yet nascent theory on organizational conflict.

**Chapter Summary**

The above review is not comprehensive; however, it is a representation of literature that seeks to provide a background for my dissertation research. This review gives an idea of the role of conflict in intercultural organizational communication literature and what has influenced this area of research over the past years. Studies of communication and culture suggest the immense influence communication has on cultural issues, especially when one talks about intercultural conflict in organizations.

From the review, studies document the importance of communication in resolving intercultural organizational conflicts. Studies also show the role national culture plays in multicultural organizations and the prominence of national culture. Again, studies show the need to recognize the importance of the sociability of human beings and how third cultures often evolve.

However, studies have not been attentive to the constitutive nature of language. Studies have also not been attentive to the role organizational culture plays in determining how workers in a multicultural setting manage their conflicts. In the same
vein, studies have not accorded to workers the agency they deserve within organizations, or acknowledged how this agency influences the way workers manage their conflict.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation examines how cultural differences of organizational members working in a multicultural setting influence their conflict style management. Based on the limitations and contributions of the existing literature, I pose the following research questions to help guide this research:

RQ1: What roles do members of a multicultural organization think organizational culture plays in how conflict is handled within their organization?

RQ2: What roles do members of a multicultural organization think national culture plays in how conflict is handled within their organization?

RQ3: What roles do members of a multicultural organization think personal culture plays in how conflict is handled within their organization?
Chapter Three: Research Method

Research is a systematic process of inquiry that requires careful planning and implementation (Best & Kahn, 1993). Ragin (1994) also stated the importance of following a protocol that will avoid any foreseeable pitfalls, allow for the efficient gathering of all needed data, and produce a quality finished product. This chapter describes the approach taken in this study. I begin with my orientation toward reality and knowledge and deliberate on how this orientation influenced my methodological choice. This is followed by the research design and, finally, an outline of the three phases of data collection and analysis processes.

The pragmatist philosophy encourages the use of any methodological approach or approaches that work best in a real world situation (Rocco, Bliss, Gallagher, & Perez-Prado, 2003). The onus rests with the researcher to identify a practical way to solve a specific research problem rather than relying on a prior commitment to a particular methodology. To clarify, the originally intended method for this research was quantitative (multiple regression) but was changed after a careful study of the unit of analysis and the setting in which the study was to be conducted. The change from a constructivist to an interpretivist approach emphasizes my pragmatist’s view of doing research which privileges issue-driven research over method-driven work.

Methodological Framework

Existing literature on conflict in multicultural organizations has often used Hofstede’s value dimensions as the theoretical framework. This poses a prominent problem in intercultural studies because most of the existing research equates
organizational culture with national culture and, as a result, reduces the effect that a strong and integrated organizational culture might have in assimilating organizational members. I argue that an organization’s culture and the self-construal of its members are equally important and need to be considered. Further work is needed to raise awareness about how the “three cultures model” influences conflict style management in multicultural organizations. In essence, this dissertation research seeks to understand how national culture, organizational culture, and personal culture, separately or jointly, influence workers’ conflict management style. To accomplish this, the method I found most suitable was the case study method. This was because the unit of analysis was bounded. In the following paragraphs, I highlight the chosen method and reasons why this approach was preferred for this project. I subsequently discuss how the chosen method was used.

Case Study

Case study researchers, like interpretivists, hold the view that reality is a social construction (Husserl, 1965). This is based on the main assumption that there is a better opportunity to understand perceptions that individuals or organizations have about their activities within their social context. As an interpretive form of research, case studies often explore the details and meanings of experience (Stake, 2000). According to Creswell (2007), “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system . . . through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information . . .” (p. 73). Stake (1995) posited that case studies are often chosen both for their “uniqueness and commonality” (p. 1) and that the preferred
case must be a “well bounded, specific, complex and functioning thing” (p. 2). Yin’s (2009) definition of a case study is two-fold. He defined a case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). The second part of his definition asserts that case study inquiry “copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points.” He continued by stating that a case study “relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result, benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.” Hammerlsey and Gomm (2000) defined a case study as “research that investigates a few cases, often just one, in considerable depth” (p. 3). They posited that the researcher “constructs cases out of naturally occurring social situations.”

From these definitions, one can discern common characteristics of case study research. The case might not only be bounded, but might also be a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context that relies on multiple sources of information. Not implicit in these definitions is that case study research can be conducted independently, either longitudinally or in a more limited temporal period, where the researcher might attempt to identify important patterns and themes in the data.

According to Stake (2000), the richness of case studies correlates with the amount of detail and contextualization that is possible when only one or a small number of focal cases and issues are analyzed. The writer's ability to provide a compelling and engaging
profile of the case, with suitable examples and linkages to broader issues, is also very important. It is important to note that obtaining descriptions and interpretations from others are the two principle uses of case studies and the idea behind these principles is to discover and show the various perspectives of the case (Stake, 1995). The case study method was chosen because of its appropriateness to my research and also its advantages.

Advantages of Case Study

According to Donmoyer (2000), there are three advantages of case study research. He lists these three as accessibility, researcher’s agency, and the vicarious experience that comes with the study. First, on accessibility, Donmoyer argued that case studies can take us to places where others would not have an opportunity to go. For example, with this dissertation, the organizations are in Ghana and in the US. I daresay that, in spite of her rich culture and history, many scholars, especially communication scholars, have done little research in the Ghanaian society. Using that site adds to the richness of scholarship and introduces a new and different experience altogether.

Secondly, case study research enables society to perceive the world from the researcher’s perspective. This allows others to experience things they otherwise might not have seen or experienced. Donmoyer (2000) explained that we do not necessarily perceive the world through the researcher’s personal and idiosyncratic perspective. He further posited that the researcher’s views might be an inter-subjectively shared theoretical perspective of a discipline or field of study. Based on its in-depth nature, it can be argued that a case study has the potential of helping others not conversant with a particular theoretical viewpoint understand that viewpoint.
Lastly, case study research allows us to vicariously experience unique situations and unique individuals within society. This vicarious experience, according to Donmoyer (2000), is less likely to generate defensiveness and resistance to learning considering that, in most societies, those in power can often force their social construction on others and, by so doing, make the organization conform to their ideas.

Based on the foregoing, I determined that a multiple, intrinsic, and embedded case study was best suited for my research. In the following paragraphs, I substantiate my choice of the case study research.

**Rationale**

Having chosen to do a multiple case study, I relied on Yin’s (2009) rationales for doing multiple case studies. Yin argued that one good rationale for conducting a multiple case study is when the study represents a critical case in testing a well-formulated theory. In this dissertation, that formulated theory is the theory on value dimensions (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 1980; Ting-Toomey, 1988). These theories on value dimensions specify a clear set of propositions and circumstances within which those propositions are believed to be true. A case study, when it satisfies all of the conditions for testing the theory, can confirm, challenge, or extend the theory. Yin argued that “the multiple case can then be used to determine whether a theory’s propositions are correct or whether some alternative set of explanations might be relevant” (p. 47). In this dissertation, the objective was to challenge and extend that theory.

An embedded design was chosen for this study. An embedded case study design involves multiple sub-units of analysis where the sub-units identified receive particular
attention from the researcher. With this design, I was able to group workers from particular geographic areas into sub-units for better in-depth analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

In a research study, data collection and analysis procedures must be sound regardless of the type of method used. The researcher must ensure that he or she collects “the richest possible data. Rich data means ideally a wide and diverse range of information collected over a relatively prolonged period of time” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 16). As a result, Yin’s (2009) recommended best practices were employed to collect data and analyze the results. The following paragraphs highlight the location, data collection methods, and analysis of the data.

Locations

As mentioned earlier, two multicultural organizations were chosen for the study. The first organization was a for-profit manufacturing concern located in Accra, Ghana. This organization is referred to in the dissertation as “site A.” Known as Syntel, it serves as a subsidiary or regional hub for an international conglomerate. Established in 1957, it has 472 members who are culturally diverse. About 20 percent of employees come from western countries including the US, while the remaining 80 percent come from more than thirty-five countries in Africa. The two common languages used are French and English. The main reason for choosing this organization was their willingness to be part of my journey.

The second organization chosen, herein referred to as “site B,” was a mid-western university in the US. This particular organization was chosen due to the willingness of its
office of institutional equity to assist and also because the institution was easily accessible to me. My choice of these two institutions was influenced by Stake’s (1995) position on selecting cases. He emphasized the importance of choosing cases which are hospitable to one’s inquiry and which possibly have a prospective informant who can be identified and who will be willing to comment on certain draft materials. Yin (2009) reiterated the same sentiments when he stated that understanding a case is greatly facilitated by finding an informant who knows a lot about the case and is willing to chat.

Participants

Participants from the institutions were selected using snowball sampling. I found the snowball sampling method to be most helpful because of the busy schedule of the employees in both institutions. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), snowball sampling might be the “only way to reach an elusive population or to engage people about a sensitive subject” (p. 114).

Participants who were interviewed had work experience ranging from 1 year to 36 years. From site A, four respondents were senior managers, and two were line managers while the rest were junior officers. This latter group included an intern. It is important to note that the intern was a lawyer by profession but had just started working with the organization as an intern. One of the senior managers was from Germany while the other three were from Nigeria, Ghana, and France. The middle managers were from Senegal and Gambia while the remaining four were from Ghana, Cote D’Ivoire, Benin, and Nigeria. Four of the respondents were women including one of the senior managers.

Participants who were interviewed from site B included eight faculty members. Of the eight, two were senior professors; four were associate professors; and two were
assistant professors. Participants were originally from England, Germany, Israel, Russia, China, Chile, Africa, USA, and Iran. The selection of participants in the university was strategic. It was intended to have a global representation or a diverse and balanced representation of faculty. It is obvious that even though site B was in the US, only one American born faculty member was involved. All had been in their current positions for more than three years with one of them being there for thirty-six years.

The rationale for the study and informed consent forms were given to all participants to read and sign before the interview commenced. I also sought permission from the participants to audio record our conversation. All agreed except for one participant at site A. As a result, notes were taken instead.

Even though the interview was scheduled to last for thirty minutes, some participants initially protested because of their busy schedule. However, most of them could not be stopped when the interview began. For instance, the Russian professor told me prior to the interview that he had another appointment in the next thirty minutes. However, after thirty minutes, he asked that individual to come back in another forty-five minutes. It is worth noting that even though a Chinese professor was one of the eight participants from site B, his responses were not included because they were not only difficult to transcribe but also too short to be used.

With interview locations, all of the interviews with participants from site B occurred in the office of the participant. With respect to site A, five of the interviews were conducted in the participant’s office while another three occurred in a conference room. The last two occurred during the participant’s lunch break at a local canteen.
For the sake of confidentiality and anonymity, all participants and organizations have been given pseudonyms.

**Methods of Data Collection**

The main method of data collection was semi-structured interview questions. According to Kvale (1996), the use of the semi-structured interview format allows for follow up and clarification questions and solicits the opinions of interviewees on the theme of the study. True to its words, this process was useful to my study. As Stake noted (1995), “the interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64), hence my choice of this process. The interview process provided an opportunity to create mutual trust between the research participants and me. Creating a rapport with each research participant and establishing a trusting relationship with them was very important in this study because of the rather sensitive nature of intercultural conflict (Corbin & Morse, 2003). I started off each interview by first enquiring about family. This was done to establish some rapport with participants and to improve immediacy between participants and me. These questions were asked after my introduction and the signing of the consent form. Most of the participants went well beyond the allotted time. The most time spent was one hour forty-five minutes.

During the interview process, I had to occasionally redirect our conversation, bringing us back to the interview questions, as participants sometimes veered off. This was not uncommon and was understandable. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), even when an interviewer is pursuing a consistent line of inquiry, the actual stream of
questions is likely to be fluid rather than rigid. Consequently, I was particularly conversational in an unbiased manner that served the needs of my line of inquiry.

As already noted, with one exception, each interview was tape recorded so as to capture the exact words from participants. According to Stake (1995), “getting the exact words of the respondent is usually not very important: it is what they mean that is important” (p. 65). Based on this advice, and the conversational style used, I asked for lots of clarifications where necessary. I also made interpretive commentary for accuracy and stylistic improvement immediately after each interview.

Again, based on the nature of the protocol questions, I had to apply “progressive focusing” (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976) to the process. Progressive focusing allows a researcher to modify initial research questions or even replace them during the study. The intention is to objectively record interviews and concurrently examine the meanings as they evolve and, where necessary, redirect the questions to refine or substantiate those meanings. For my research, I had to rearrange some of the questions and rephrase others for clarification purposes. After the interview data were collected, it was transcribed.

Data Analysis

Case study data analysis usually involves an iterative and cyclical process that advances from general to more specific observations (Creswell, 2007; Silverman, 2000). My analysis focused on narrowing my findings to achieve a rich and detailed report. To make that plausible, I started the analysis informally during the interviewing process and continued during transcription. As Creswell (2007) posited, there are two strategic ways that researchers reach new meanings about cases. These are through direct interpretation
of the individual instance and through aggregation of instances until something is found that distinguishes them as a class.

During the analysis phase, I tried to tease out relationships while probing the issues. Some categorical data were also aggregated. I was, throughout the process, guided by Stake’s (1995) warning of a situation where the aggregation of categorical data can become a distraction. He advised that most of the time be spent on direct interpretation of the data. The direct interpretation of the data began after transcription and data coding. While at it, salient points, patterns, and structures were duly noted.

**Interpretation**

Yin (2007) advised that researchers should establish the importance of themes or findings that are crucial to the study. This process was followed to the letter. I identified themes that I tried connecting to larger theoretical and practical issues.

Based on my findings, I am empowered to propose the three cultures model hoping that other scholars and practitioners alike could support, test, compare, or refute my findings in subsequent research. I also look forward to doing the same by myself when I next look at a multilateral organization such as the United Nations.

**Chapter Summary**

This case study approach was chosen because of the bounded nature and uniqueness of the case. Relying on scholars (such as Robert Stake, Robert Yin, and John Creswell) dedicated to this approach, I adopted, as much as possible, the best practices they recommended for multiple case study research and hope that this approach would contribute to scholarship. Advantages to using this approach have been duly explicated
in an effort to promote the use of case studies in other research work. Based on the recommended best practices, attention was paid to what respondents’ meant to ensure authenticity in respondents’ statements. Consequently, the voices of my participants are evident in the next chapter where I present the results of my findings.
Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this research was to examine the role that three cultures (organizational culture, national culture, personal culture) play in meanings organizational members construct to explain each other’s behaviors and reactions to organizational situations, especially situations they define as involving conflict. As a researcher, I believe that there is the need for a change in the status quo (where most literature has relied heavily on Hofstede’s value dimensions) for a better understanding of the influence of culture on organizational communication. As a result, the Three Cultures Model (Gardenswatz et al., 2003) was used as a lens to focus on intercultural communication within multicultural environments. The study explored the implications of cross-cultural interactions among workers and how those workers characterized their responses to real or perceived conflicts within their work environment.

Consequently, the following key research questions guided this work: (a) What roles do members of a multicultural organization think organizational culture plays in how conflict is handled within their organization? (b) What roles do members of a multicultural organization think national culture plays in how conflict is handled within their organization? (c) What roles do members of a multicultural organization think personal culture plays in how conflict is handled within their organization?

This chapter presents key findings obtained from in-depth interviews with eighteen workers from two different multicultural institutions. Ten of the respondents were employees of a for-profit organization (site A) based in Ghana, West Africa, while the other eight respondents were faculty and administrative staff of a mid-western
university (site B) in the US. This chapter begins with a discussion that highlights and conceptualizes the results from the two institutions. The conceptualization begins with a synopsis of responses to the interview questions. That synopsis is followed by a brief assessment, or interpretation, of the responses and an articulation of “cross-case” conclusions (Yin, 2009).

Overview of Major Findings

Organizational Culture

Sixteen (90%) of the participants overwhelmingly agreed that organizational culture greatly influences how they handle conflicts within their organization. However, only twelve (70%) of them (site A: 7; site B: 5) believed their organization had structures in place that were useful when they encountered conflicts.

More specifically, twelve (70%) participants (site A: 6; site B: 6) indicated that they would have resolved their conflicts differently but for the culture of their organization. The other six participants (30%) (site A: 4; site B: 2) indicated that their personal culture was what influenced how they handled their conflicts within their organization. All of the participants indicated that the diversity of a group did not make any difference to the way they approached projects. However, five (Site A: 2; site B: 3) indicated a preference for doing independent projects rather than working on team projects. Seventeen (95%) respondents (Site A: 10; site B: 7), irrespective of their institutional or geographical location, perceived conflict as a misunderstanding between two or more individuals. All but two (site A: 1; site B: 1) of the respondents indicated
that conflict could be both good and bad. Eight (45%) respondents (site A: 7; site B: 1) had experienced some communication difficulties with colleagues from other countries.

**National Culture**

Four (20%) of the participants (site A: 1; site B: 3) indicated that national culture had some influence on how they handled conflicts within their organization while twelve (70%) (site A: 8; site B: 4) disagreed. Of the latter who disagreed, four (site A: 3; site B: 1) believed the influence was more personal while eight (site A: 5; site B: 3) believed the organizational influence was paramount.

Sixteen (90%) of the participants (site A: 9; site B: 7) indicated that their nationality did not influence how they were treated by their supervisors or subordinates at their workplace while the other two participants expressed different opinions. Of the two, one (site B) believed he was given preferential treatment because of his nationality while the other (site A) believed he was discriminated against because of his nationality. Only three participants (site A: 1; Site B: 2) could recall a major conflict they had encountered within their organizations. Even then, they did not perceive the conflict as intercultural in anyway. About the incidence of intercultural conflicts within their organization, only one participant from site A had experienced it. All others responded in the negative.

**Personal Culture**

All participants overwhelmingly agreed that personal culture (self construal) played a major role in how they handled their conflict within their workplace. The self
construal concept explains culturally based differences in perception and behavior at the individual level (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Seventeen (95%) participants (site A: 10; site B: 7) believed that teamwork was important in achieving productivity even though six (all from site B) preferred working as individuals to working as a team. Of the six, one strongly preferred working solo. On the use of first names within their organization, none of the participants (site A: 10; site B: 8) minded being called by his or her first name. The participants at site A were accepting of the use of their first name because it was part of their organization’s culture.

Sixteen (90%) participants (site A: 9; site B: 7) indicated they were comfortable in being direct and forthright in their dealings with others. Six participants (site A: 4; site B: 2) voiced the belief that tact and diplomacy were necessary in how people generally interacted with others. Two of the participants (site A) noted that interactions would or should be different with subordinates than with colleagues while ten participants (Site A: 8; Site B: 2) indicated that interactions would or should be different and more respectful with superiors.

About being commended in public, fourteen participants (site A: 8; site B: 6) did not mind that practice. The other four (site A: 1; site B: 3) were not comfortable being commended in public. Sixteen (90%) participants (Site A: 8; Site B: 8) described themselves as multicultural either due to secondary experiences or to their encounters with other cultures during their working period or sojourns.
Discussions of Findings

The following is a discussion of the findings just overviewed with details that support and explain each finding. I use this approach to enable the “reader [to] better understand the reality of the research participants . . . , while allowing the participants to speak for themselves” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 111).

Concept of Conflict

The research findings showed that seventeen participants (site A: 10; site B: 7), irrespective of their type of institution and geographical location, broadly defined conflict as a disagreement between two or more colleagues. As a result, I use conflict in my research as a disagreement between two or more people. Only two participants (site A: 1; site B: 1) described conflict as something more than a disagreement. To them, conflict had to be avoided at all times because it was, more often than not, unproductive.

According to Keyton (2005), conflict refers to differences or opinions of diametrically opposed goals and values that occur in the process of organizing. She posited that conflict is an unavoidable part of task and relational communication whether the interactions occur among co-workers, between subordinate and supervisor, or between organizational member and customer. In my opinion, intercultural conflict is an insidious characteristic of organizational life that has often been ignored by organizational practitioners and scholars alike probably because of its sensitive nature. Most research on intercultural conflicts within organizations confirms its inevitability and ubiquity; yet, what is critical for individual and group functioning is how conflict is
managed (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). In addition to its inevitability, another critical feature is how individuals perceive conflict.

The varied perceptions of conflict have culminated in different definitions of the term. To fully understand participants’ perceptions of conflict, they were first asked to describe how they understood conflict. Their unanimous responses signified a basic understanding of the word as a misunderstanding or disagreement between two or more people. However, sixteen respondents (site A: 9; site B: 7) expressed the belief that intercultural conflict could be positive and/or healthy within an organization. It is worth noting that a majority (9) of the respondents were from collectivistic countries and were (according to Hofstede’s cultural value dimensions) perceived to have an affinity towards ignoring conflicts because conflicts, in general, are perceived as bad and unproductive. However, my findings illustrated that, irrespective of their “predicted” characteristic, all but two (site A: 1; site B: 1) of the participants understood the good and bad sides of conflicts. This reality, in my opinion, could be due either to their personal culture or their organizational culture, as most of them indicated. Kayla (a legal practitioner and intern from site A) described conflict as an “opposition of interests or ideas among parties.” To her, “conflicts could be good or bad. When there is a conflict it will enable you to challenge yourself.” Like Kayla, Gunther, an audit manager (site A), defined conflict as “normal”:

   It is a simple misunderstanding between different people with respect to ideology and how things are done. In my opinion conflict is not an issue because it is endemic among groups of people. The issue is how conflict
is managed. The way conflict is being managed can either make it positive or negative. But, generally, conflicts are unavoidable once there is diversity in this organization.

Gunther’s stance on conflict is interesting to say the least. He does not see conflict as a problem because it is endemic. One would have thought that the opposite were true, i.e., that workers see any cankerous development as an inhibition to growth. Trivializing conflict could influence members’ responses and that should be a concern within any organization.

Unlike Kayla and Gunther, Mary, a Human Resource Manager (site A), described conflict as something that had to be avoided because of its negative repercussions. She had this to say:

Conflict is simply misunderstanding; this is it and as you know, conflict takes place in all kinds of relationships. Even when you have the same culture, the same origin, even within the nuclear family, there is conflict. In my local language it is said that even the tongue and the teeth have conflicts, yet they stay together in the mouth. Conflict is an issue that we cannot run from no matter what. As to whether conflict is good or bad, as an HR practitioner, and especially from the functional perspective, one would not want to encourage conflicts. We do not promote conflict. As much as possible we want to live harmoniously with one another. We should have at the back of our minds that somehow conflict will take
place. To that extent, from the functional perspective, we have rules to resolve them when they happen.

Mary’s functional perspective sounds interesting because one would think that, as someone in HR, she would encourage good (i.e., constructive) conflict. However, her stance of shying completely away from conflict might also be justified considering the statement made by a participant that, when all resolutions fail, they go to HR for arbitration. Her reality of conflict might be tainted by the types of conflicts she encounters as an HR person and a conflict mediator.

Sophia, a sales officer (site A), responded by using an intercultural lens. She attributed intercultural conflicts to language barriers of members within the institution. With language being an integral part of culture, it is not surprising that language barrier is mentioned by a few respondents. However, what is surprising is that most respondents (site A) indicated that they had not been involved in any intercultural conflicts within the organization. In response to a question concerning whether she had experienced any intercultural conflicts within her organization, Sophia had this to say:

Definitely when you are working with different nationalities you cannot avoid conflicts because you do not speak the same language. Sometimes what you mean in French does not have the same meaning in English. So sometimes there is some frustration mainly because you may be working in a department where we have more women than men. Here some emotions may come into play, but you try to manage it. Sometimes when you want to say something in English it may be misinterpreted wrongly.
But the good thing is that, the French people are learning English and the English people are learning French. So certain times when I want to say something in English but cannot express myself well, because I don’t want to mis-communicate, I ask an English colleague to assist.

As earlier stated, the responses from site A were not significantly different from those from site B. Here are a few responses of some participants from site B.

Glinka, a Russian professor with thirteen years experience defined conflict as “a kind of disagreement between two people on the same issue.” On how he perceived conflict, he stated that “conflicts are not good because conflicts make people to react in a negative way. But some disagreements may be fruitful, but sometimes people don’t always agree on issues and this may be fruitful because they present different opinions.”

Like Glinka, Bruck, an associate professor from Israel with nine years working experience stated:

Conflict is probably when you have disagreement which is irresolvable or difficult to resolve. In principle, conflicts bring out the negative association but I can think about conflict which would be a drive for positive things. I may think about this kind of thing that if you are (this may not necessarily be conflict) but if you are too comfortable, you may not be moving forward sometimes. So many times when you. . . . I’m just thinking about what is positive about conflict because it is always about bringing out negative things. For example in conflict you can lose a lot of resources and you may be in a stand still because there is nothing that will
put you in progress. But on the other hand conflict could escalate progress. Also sometimes if you avoid conflicts, you basically give up on what you want; which may not be necessarily a good thing. You can be in conflict with someone and there might be a different way to resolve it . . . , but if you say I don’t want to be in conflict and I will run away from conflict then basically you are losing things that you want.

Kastner, an assistant professor from Germany with ten years working experience, had this to say about whether conflict was good or bad:

It depends; I have seen conflict that is bad and conflict that is good. Sometimes there is conflict when people just try to get whatever they want and they don’t think for the greater good; then conflict is bad and leads to bad relationships in the department. Once you have a department where people have their own opinions but are willing to give in for the greater good, I think conflict is very helpful.

Garcia, an associate professor from Chile with fourteen years work experience, had a different take on the issue of conflict. Even though she described conflict as disagreement, she did not think disagreements within a professional setting, such as a university, could be described as conflict. Her response lends credence to why I chose to empower participants to define conflict, so as to enable a better expression from respondents. Her response is as follows:

I don’t know if I would have a way of defining conflict for you because I think that professionally there is diversity of opinions, as disagreements.
You know I don’t think I experience conflicts per se. In a professional setting I have hard time thinking about what it would look like ok! I suppose that if we had an interchange that was unprofessional; let’s say there was raising of voices; if there were certain activities that went outside of the scope of professional exchange; then I would consider that as conflict.

The selected responses above are a good representation of all responses received. Based on the responses, conflict was generally defined as a disagreement or misunderstanding among colleagues. While most of the respondents reported perceiving conflict as a positive thing, a few others reported it as negative. However, the latter group still saw the possibility of something positive and productive emanating from conflicts. It is important to state that the majority of participants from site A, although from collectivistic societies, did not avoid conflicts as predicted by Hofstede (1991). Rather, they acknowledged the importance of conflict in improving productivity based on their orientation within the organization in which they work. On the flip side, some respondents from site B (who were from individualistic societies), ignored conflicts unlike what had been indicated by Hofstede. Garcia’s response is an indication of the effect of organizational structures and culture on members’ understanding of what constitutes conflict.

**Communication Difficulties**

Eight respondents, (site A: 7; site B: 1) had experienced some communication difficulties with colleagues from other countries. It is important to note that three
respondents (site B) answered “no” to this question and indicated they had no further comments. This could be due to the sensitive nature of the issue or could be a sincere response to the question. Seven (site A: 1; site B: 6) of those who responded to the question stated that they had not experienced any communication difficulties with their colleagues from other countries. This is an interesting development because, from my interviews with most of the respondents from site B, I noticed a marked difference in the accent of most of the respondents. In fact, during the transcription period, I spent double the average time transcribing two particular interviews because of their accent.

Consequently, my expectation was to have more participants express concerns about communication difficulties but that did not materialize. As aforementioned, most of the responses indicated that there were no difficulties. I acknowledge the possibility that participants (site B) might not have experienced any communication difficulties in spite of the existence of language barriers and heavy accents. However, there is also the possibility that, due to the sensitivity of the issue, participants were unwilling to divulge such information. It could also be argued that the organizational culture might have contributed to a high level of collegiality, thus trivializing issues of communication difficulties such as one’s accent.

In the following paragraphs, I highlight some of the communication difficulties that were experienced mostly by participants from site A, and the outlier from site B. I will then present a quote from one of the participants who had not experienced any difficulties but whose quote illustrates a different story.
Adama, a female materials manager (site A) with two years work experience, had this to say:

Yes, one day I had a problem with the information department. I asked this colleague who was there what to do because I had a little problem with getting some information and he got angry with me. I wanted to know why and it was because he was not supposed to handle that. But why must he be angry if he was not the one to handle the problem? He could have re-directed me but instead he was angry. I got another friend to try to find out what I did wrong but it came out that it was because of the way I presented the case. So sometimes we get these issues and it is because the way we say it in French is different from the way it is said in English. So there are issues bordering on politeness.

Like Adama, Edward, a senior brands manager with nine years of work experience, also attributed the communication difficulty to differences in language. He interestingly and proactively referred to the phenomenon as a challenge (that could be surmounted) rather than a problem, which could have negative connotations. The following is what he had to say:

Challenges, yes; but not necessarily problems. . . . You may want to talk to someone who may not be willing to cooperate; in that case you back off. You may also send an email to a colleague who may not understand the content by virtue of the fact he or she may not understand the English language well. Even the tone of the mail can make one get upset and in
this case you meet and explain yourself. This happens and it is because people here are either English or French speaking. These are the main challenges; otherwise there is no problem.

Veronica, a human resource officer (site A) with eleven years working experience, also saw language barriers as the culprit. Even though she had not experienced such problems, she described how those difficulties might arise and gave an illustration to buttress her point:

If I can use an example to illustrate; of the countries that we represent, only 2 of them are English speaking, i.e., Ghana and Nigeria. The rest are all Francophone. So sometimes our understanding of things might differ. Usually it is a matter of semantics; the way I might explain something in English might not have the same meaning in French and vice versa. So sometimes there are those kinds of disagreements. . . . The language barrier aside, usually if somebody is sitting in front of you and you are having a discussion about something, it is easy for you to probe and probe and ask questions and try to understand. But in a situation where someone’s line manager is positioned in one country and the subordinate is in another, the best medium of communication becomes the email. In your haste you probably wouldn’t clarify certain things or you may have written the email in English not considering that the receiver is French. Situations like these sometimes pose communication problems for us.
Sophia, a sales officer (site A) with four years working experience, narrated her encounters with a colleague. Even though she, like others previously mentioned, attributed the communication difficulty to the language barriers between French and English speaking workers, her stance could be disputed. I come from Ghana, another English speaking country. It is not standard practice to call colleagues by their first names within an organization or even within a social setting. However, Sophia, a French speaking individual, accounted for a conflict that emerged when she addressed a colleague by using that individual’s family name through reference to language barriers. My own reading of the situation is that this is, perhaps, a rather simplistic and easy way to explain the problem she encountered. It can be argued that the expectations communicated by Sophia’s Nigerian colleague were more in line with organizational practice (culture) than a national practice (culture). Almost all of the participants at site A attested to the fact that Syntel’s workers address each other by their first names. Given her four year working experience with Syntel, arguably, Sophia should have been well aware of the culture of the organization and not made that error. Below is Sophia’s description of what occurred:

I had a misunderstanding/conflict with a Nigerian colleague working in Nigeria. I sent an email to her and addressed her with her family name instead of using her first name. This is because, in the French language, we can use either your family or your first name; it doesn’t matter. I did not realize that was unacceptable in Nigeria, so when she received the mail she got so angry with me and replied very harshly to me. I asked for
an explanation and was told that was not acceptable. So since then I
address her by only her first name.

Tacker, an American professor with over twenty years experience in academia
and other organizations, was the only participant from site B who responded that he had
experienced communication difficulties. His response to the question is as follows:

Yes. Some of them will be well along the lines of just understanding the
context of where the person is coming from. . . . The main reason why
disputes arise is usually a fundamental problem in communication where
the message sent is not received. And sometimes, with people from other
cultures, it’s difficult to understand the context in which they’re speaking.
You do not have the basis or the knowledge for their sort of cultural
experiences, so that is very difficult and presents all kinds of problems. . . .
Questions that come to mind include the following: what is the reference
point this person is coming from, what are they thinking? Why are they
saying these and why is it a major issue with them? Remember that the
United States is a very ethnocentric culture; it does not turn. Even though
in the academic environment they do pay lip service to respecting other
cultures and attempt to do that, in many cases we don’t do a very good
job, in this country, of trying to understand or respect other cultures.

Based on my personal experience, I find Tacker’s response to be more realistic. On
numerous occasions, I have had to repeat myself several times because of my accent. On
other occasions, I have had to rephrase my sentence because my message to the receiver
was unclear. The experience has been the same with other colleagues from different countries as was expressly stated by participants from site A. This then raises an interesting question: Why do professionals from site B state that they have not encountered any intercultural communication difficulties? Could it be a general misunderstanding of the question? Or, as already stated, were they staying away from a sensitive topic?

As earlier mentioned, participants’ responses from site A attributed communication difficulties to language barriers between French and English speaking members. Although possible, there is some risk involved in “pointing the finger” at the language issue without paying attention to other issues such as organizational practices or the individual worker’s own preference for how she/he is to be addressed. The influence of a national culture comes into play here because respondents from site A clearly drew distinctions between people from English versus Francophone countries.

Organizational Culture

Influence within Workplace

Sixteen (site A: 9; site B: 7) participants overwhelmingly agreed that the organizational culture of an establishment greatly influenced how they will handle conflicts within the organization. However, twelve out of the sixteen indicated their organization had structures in place that were useful to abate conflicts.

According to Smit (2001), “organizational cultures are widely recognized for their considerable influence on the well-being of industrial as well as non-industrial enterprises and their employees” (p. 165). In the same vein, De Witte and van Muijen (1999) also
described organizational culture as having an emotional sense of involvement and commitment to organizational values and moral codes which, in turn, prescribed and prohibited particular behaviors. Both statements were confirmed by some of the responses received from both sites.

However, some disparities come into play here. Even though a majority of the participants from site A (9) indicated there were systems in place that influenced their actions, only two participants from site B gave similar indications.

The disparity, I would argue, should be expected considering that most participants at site B experience a relatively higher autonomy in their workplaces than those from site A. That notwithstanding, one could argue that the type of institution being studied—a manufacturing concern versus a university—had some influence on participants’ responses and perceptions.

Secondly, even though some participants (mostly from site A) acknowledged the existence of deliberate structures to ensure decorum and civility among the workforce, others (mostly site B) found these rules to be rather latent, artificial, or non-existent. This stance is not farfetched from Butler and Earley’s (2001) statement that, although “managing organizational culture is increasingly important to the success of organizations . . . , it has become increasingly difficult to do so” (p. 53). The difficulty rests in the resistance such management sometimes faces from an organization’s members. However, other organizational cultural practices that have evolved over time through regular patterns of communication (such as gathering at the food canteen to eat
together) endured and were what most participants referred to when asked about organizational culture.

Third, there was a school of thought (among respondents) that how workers reacted to conflict had more to do with their personal culture than the influence of organizational culture or national culture. In the following paragraphs, I highlight some responses from participants that speak to the issue on organizational culture and its influence on how workers handle issues of conflict. This is what Ayishetu (site A) had to say:

I think every organization has something in place to help handle conflicts otherwise (my English is not very good . . . otherwise . . . what do I say) if you do not put in place guidelines to regulate people, people may not put in their best. This is because they are afraid to make mistakes and since everyone is responsible for what he/she does, people will be afraid to go all out to do things which make them get into trouble. The organizational culture therefore helps to make some of these expectations more flexible for people to work freely.

The assumption that most organizations have structures or rules in place that control member behavior is quite popular. According to Keyton (2005), “sometimes assumptions guide behavior by directing how organizational members should perceive, think, feel and act” (p. 25). Assumptions are so prevalent that we run the risk of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the actions of others who behave according to a different set of assumptions (Schein, 1992). Six of the participants, including Ayishetu,
referred to these assumptions and described them as unspoken rules within both sites.

Mary (site A), like her colleague Ayishetu, voiced a similar perspective on the distinct influence of organizational culture on its members. According to her:

Different structures are put in place to manage conflicts when they arise. At the very low level, they have grievance handling procedures that are put in place for employees to follow in cases of conflicts. When these fail, there is the conflict resolution board. On a regular basis, rules or codes must be followed, especially in a factory setting where lots of misunderstandings take place. Here, there are concrete steps to follow until conflicts are resolved. As people progress from this lower level to a higher level, they tend to understand the process better and they get into positions . . . where they can resolve their conflicts or follow the steps.

Unlike her colleagues, who gave a general response to the question, Sophia (site A) was more specific in her response and used her organization as an example. Organizational culture, in her opinion:

Shapes personality both within the organization and outside the organization. I would say the organization’s culture does not encourage conflicts. Left to my own personality, I would have fought back. This is because in Syntel they give us good training at managing conflicts. A month ago, we trained in leadership, management, and communication. That has been very helpful. But left with Sophia, I will fight. In fact, my attitude is such that I am called “small pepper” (lots of laughter).
Sophia’s response gives an indication of her fiery personality and the influence of her organizational culture on her both internally and externally. This was a trend that evolved from site A. Most workers indicated their willingness to privilege the objectives of their organization at the cost of their individual whims and caprices.

Like Sophia, Bruck (site B), an Israeli professor, referred to mundane practices in his department that had evolved into an organizational culture and how the implementation of this culture influenced the behavior of members. As to whether organizational culture influenced how members will behave in conflict situations, his response was:

Yea, definitely; because there is always a behavior that can get a response so if someone smiles to you, you smile back but if someone does not smile to you, you might not smile back. . . . I like the culture here where you have confidence in other people; for example, each faculty has a key for all the doors. This is the confidence and respect that you have been given and you also must give it back. It does not have to be like that and I am sure there could be other environments which could influence the way you do business.

It is interesting to note how these minute, mundane practices influence organizational members’ attitude. This could win them over to be better members of that organization. Bruck’s moment, as indicated, rested in the symbolic significance of possessing department keys. His appreciation of that gesture might be a result of his past experiences with other organizations. However, what was important was his feeling of
belongingness and the trust in him implied by this gesture. This had won him over and might have positively influenced his behavior in a variety of ways. Like Bruck, Jones (site B) also felt valued by the organization and believed he was part of the team. He had this to say:

In this organization it is particularly hard to tell. The organization can help to build a community or pride of place and when you have that, when that's always at the back of your mind that you are part of an institution, you are more likely to be optimistic. . . . All these kinds of things can help resolve the conflict. But I'm just thinking about how it will be like in a different institution or a more competitive institution that would be less flexible and more cutthroat in trying to get yourself through a more selfish means to an end. I guess it is not so competitive here and so, maybe, we have some benefits here.

From their responses, both Jones and Bruck (who work within the same department), see the influence of organizational culture on membership behavior. Jones expressed the belief that, when the organizational culture provides for a sense of belonging, it subsequently influences how one behaves. Jones’ statement also indicates his awareness of particular structures and/or practices in place that enhance collegiality and help in minimizing conflicts. In my opinion, his attempt to compare the culture of his institution with that of other institutions indicates the influence an organization’s culture can have on its workforce.
Like Jones, Glinka (site B), a female professor from a different department, acknowledged the existence of structures that enables the organizational system to flow. She stated:

I think that, in this organization, there are committees; and people work in these committees discussing certain problems/issues so that, later on, they can come to certain common agreements. At least, in this department, there are conflicts certainly; the system is pretty workable; it is a working system. Sometimes there are clashes but they do not lead to distractions, so basically the system works quite well . . . , it may be better, it may improve. But I see that some amount of conflict will be there because of human nature.

Unlike Glinka, Kayla (site A) argued that human behavior is influenced more by self construal (personal culture) than by organizational culture and/or national culture. Like many others, Kayla’s response privileges the concept of personal culture without considering the effect of the existing social network within the organization. Notably, Kayla is a Ghanaian lawyer from a collectivistic society; yet her initial statement could be likened to someone from an individualistic society going by Hofstede’s value dimensions. Kayla explained:

The problem is not organizational or national culture; it is more of personal culture. We all come from different backgrounds and we are all working towards the same goal. In order to achieve this, we need certain values; we have to respect people from different backgrounds and we have
to commit ourselves to achieve our goals. We are not there yet, but we are still working at it. However, organizational culture still has a lot to do; it has to take into account the different values of the employees. Otherwise at the end of the day people will clash.

Kayla was not a lone ranger. Darab (site B) also asked the rhetorical question “is it not rather personal culture?” Kayla’s statement about diverse individuals working towards the same goal addresses the fundamental canon in social constructivism and also justifies why third cultures arise, especially in organizational settings. It can be argued that having a common objective within the organization enables members to focus more on the organization’s mission and how to attain that mission rather than on employee differences. This phenomenon could explain why language barriers were not a threat to respondents from site B.

**Influence on Individual Behaviors**

Twelve participants (Site A: 6; Site B: 6) indicated that they would have resolved their conflicts differently but for their organizational culture. The other six participants (site A: 4; site B: 2) indicated that their personal culture was what influenced how they handled their conflicts within the organization. During my interviews, I realized that some participants found it difficult to identify their organizational culture. In most cases, I tried identifying practices within the organization that might serve as part of the culture; once that was established, they seemed to understand the concept. The following is what some participants had to say when acknowledging the influence of organizational culture at their work places.
Edward, the brands manager (site A) with nine years working experience, stated: Okay, organizational culture is quite general. Let me narrow it down to this organization. The organizational culture is that we all report in line, we respect our superiors irrespective of what he said to you yesterday or this morning. The culture is that we all sit together and eat in one canteen, and this tends to foster unity especially when there are personal conflicts to be resolved. The fact that you do not want to eat in the canteen may mean that you may not want to interact with other colleagues that you had misunderstanding with.

Veronica, a human resource officer (site A), offered a different opinion regarding organizational culture. Even though she admitted to the existence of decision-making structures, she did not believe those structures were set in place to combat conflict. She explained:

About structures within this company, I wouldn’t say there are such rules in managing conflicts as such. Usually when one has some disagreement with a boss, everybody would expect that you sit with the boss to discuss it. What are the issues? Where did I go wrong etc? If that doesn’t work and the conflict escalates, the next point of call is your boss’s boss. And if that also fails, then HR comes in to arbitrate. . . . But here, you can tell your boss when he is doing something wrong, and ideally he should not use it against you. That is not to say that there are no people who hold things against you because that is the way they are.
The contradiction in Veronica’s response is obvious. Even though she dismissed the existence of rules for managing conflicts, she described the structures in place for resolving conflicts within her organization. This might be due to her misunderstanding of what culture represented or that she found the procedure to be mundane and, therefore, invisible.

**Influence on Group Diversity**

All participants indicated that the diversity of a group did not make any difference to the way they would approach or handle projects. However, five (Site A: 2; site B: 3) of them stated that they would prefer doing independent projects to working on team projects.

This question was asked to ascertain whether differences in multicultural organizations permeated membership ranks to the extent of negatively affecting productivity within the organization. Responses supported the social constructivist view that, in circumstances like these, the “constitutiveness” of language often comes into play to foster a third culture where members within that organization come together for a common and mutual objective. A follow up question sought to inquire if participants preferred working alone on a project or with others (as a team).

The responses to this question varied, yet although seventeen of the participants in this research did not mind working as a team, one out of the three respondents (site B), who preferred independent projects, indicated his disdain for teamwork. Generally, their responses partially supported Hofstede's individualistic and collectivistic tenet that members from individualistic societies prefer working on projects individually compared
to the other group; however, most of the respondents preferred working as a team or were indifferent to working within a diverse environment. The findings here support the notion that self construal plays a major role in how people behave within organizational settings. It was my expectation to see more respondents from site B express a willingness to work independently compared to those from site A based on the individualism and collectivism value dimension (Hofstede, 1991; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). However, the difference was insignificant, indicating that members within these organizations, irrespective of their places of birth and/or nationality, had some agency to make decisions based on their prevailing circumstances. It is refreshing to note that organizational members will make decisions towards a common objective on the basis of the circumstance and not their origin. Edward (site A), for example, had this to say:

It is a challenge. The fact that people are from different backgrounds poses different questions to you. And in generating those answers, you find out you are able to provide solutions. For instance, I am in a section where we produce items for countries of diverse cultures and there are people from different cultures in this organization who represent all these diverse cultures. We tend to get ideas from these people as to how their countries or cultures will react to the products we produce, and this is able to help us package our products to suit all these diverse cultures. So here it brings to the table different opinions and helps to shape our market.

Veronica (site A) also acknowledged that "diversity plays an absolute role in every organization. That is why we say in our local language that two heads are better
than one. If one person can make all the decisions, then there will be no need for a company." Like Veronica and Edward, Edmund a sales development manager (site A), responded by saying:

I think it impacts positively. Diversity should promote better achievement of objectives. The fact that people come from different backgrounds, and with different skills, always gives the opportunity for you to learn more. The second thing is, when people are working together, the message they should bear in mind is, why are you coming to work together? The issue is that they didn’t come to work for personalities but to work for a company which has its set objectives. If we come from different backgrounds with different experiences, there is an added value to achieving our company’s objectives. There is no talk about some people coming to impose their ideas. If that happens, and also if one does not understand the culture; that is when there is bound to be conflicts.

Reiterating what her colleagues had mentioned, Mary, an HR manager (site A), had this to say:

Well, we have a lot of diversity here in terms of cultural and ideological differences. In all our projects, we make sure these diversities are taken into account so that others are not unduly treated. Diversity of opinions also helps in achieving better results. Local and foreign workers are put together in the manufacturing process. We also try to strike a balance and use appropriate language to communicate to all.
The responses received from workers (site A) showed an appreciation of team work and the need for diversity of opinions to be encouraged for efficiency and effectiveness. Their responses did not give any hints of high power distance. Rather, those responses embraced individuality and encouraged independent minds to be harnessed for better results. It is obvious from their responses that they highly valued team work and diversity of opinions. The situation was not different from site B.

Kastner, a German professor (site B), was indifferent to the issue: "No, no!! That really doesn’t concern me. I like it [workplace diversity] very much. From my point of view, it has never been a problem." Kastner’s response had me thinking about the reflexivity of the researcher. I wondered if my presence, accent, and/or color engendered the response I received. I found myself scrutinizing his short response. “He liked it very much” yet it had “never been a problem.” I was expecting some response that gave an indication of encouragement or support for diverse opinions. However, to be fair to Kastner’s response, I might have to assume my physical appearance did not play a role.

Jones, an English professor (site B), supported the assertion and possibility that third cultures evolve under certain circumstances (especially within organizations). He allegedly only dealt with “colleagues” and did not even think about their nationalities. He stated:

I don’t know if I think about the different countries as much as I think of the different personalities and cultures. I guess I don’t put culture first when I think about how to put across an argument or if I had a question about someone else’s argument.
The question that comes to mind is: Would Jones feel the same way if the organizational culture were different? Was his approach a result of his familiarity with diverse individuals during his primary socialization?

Darab, an Iranian professor (site B) with over 30 years work experience also supported the notion of working with people from different backgrounds. He saw an advantage to working in teams because “different people have different specializations. Someone is good in writing; I was good in manipulation of estimations so we could complement each other.”

Garcia (site B), on the other hand, was indifferent to the composition of the workforce or project group. Her response, however, showed her sensitivity to group dynamics which could be attributed to her national heritage as a Chilean or her personal culture. She started by saying that “no, not really. I am very “opened” to whatever mixes happen to me. It [workplace diversity] does not really matter.” She continued with the following explanation:

No it doesn’t, because I feel by approaching it that way demeans those people, so you know, I don’t look at it like “Oh! They are international. We have to approach it differently;” or “Oh! They’re black;” “Oh! They’re Spanish;” “Oh! They’re Eskimo.” I just approach people the way people should be approached, and how I would want to be approached. To be honest with you if . . . , the shoe was on the other foot and I was somewhere else in the world and they said “Oh! We have to do this
because she is an American,” I will feel weird, so I don’t want them to feel weird and I want them to feel included in the group.

Garcia’s response was reflective of Jones’ and all others mentioned. It also highlighted the fact that, with organizations, the nationalities of members does not play as significant a role as the organizational culture and the personal culture of the players (members) involved. The question that arises here is, what role does national culture play?

**National Culture**

According to Hosftede (1991), “the main cultural differences among nations lie in values . . . , all our mental programs are affected by values that are reflected in our behavior” (p. 236). The leading approach to national culture draws on Hofstede’s work (1980) and defines culture mainly as a set of values and norms which guide behaviors. Consequently, most research in multi-cultural studies uses country-level analyses to study cultures. However, with the advent of globalization and the dynamic nature of cultures (changes over time), the relevance of national culture or use of Hofstede’s cultural values must be questioned (Chevrier, 2009). Osland and Bird (2000) highlighted the limits of Hofstede’s definition by shedding light on the “cultural paradox,” pointing out that culture, as a set of values and norms, does not account for the diversity of behaviors within a given cultural group and that generalizations are not reliable since many exceptions can be observed. This concept necessitated this research question, and participants’ responses, to a large extent, support Osland and Bird’s hypothesis.
Influence on Workers Behavior

Four of the participants (site A: 1; site B: 3) indicated that national culture had some influence on how they handled conflicts within their organization while twelve participants (site A: 8; site B: 4) disagreed. Of the twelve, four (site A: 2; site B: 2) indicated that the influence was more personal while eight (site A: 6; site B: 2) indicated that organizational influence was paramount. Edward, at site A, explained:

I do not think one’s national culture is significant in the way we resolve conflicts. Whatever your culture is, so far as you take employment into a multi-national environment, you would conform to the culture of that environment. Well, unless I don’t understand what national culture is, we have ethnic cultures, which come together to form national cultures. Maybe you may say that, generally, Ghana has a hospitality culture. So definitely in working with an organization such as ours, you will need our hospitality to be able to work well. If anything, these cultures, i.e., national and organizational cultures may complement each other. Otherwise, I don’t see how a national culture can actually impact on our organizational behavior.

Edward brought up points worth discussing. I agree with his assertion that countries are made up of sub-ethnic cultures. A case in point is my country, Ghana. There are over 19 languages and more than 49 spoken dialects. The cultural heritages are so diverse that I am a total stranger in certain parts of the country. Fortunately, English has been adopted as the lingua franca thus making communication easy among the
different ethnic groups. It is obvious that this situation is not peculiar to Ghana. Most sovereign states have sub-ethnic cultures which influence, either positively or negatively, the existence of “true” national cultures. Edward acknowledged the existence of particular national traits but did not think, according to his statement, that those traits influence how workers handle their conflicts. His response also reifies the constitutive nature of language and social constructivist theory. Unlike Edward, Veronica (site A) presented a different perspective. According to her:

If I look at the different kinds of nationals we have, there are those who are non-confrontational, especially the Ghanaians, and those who are aggressive. For example, some of the Francophone people speak their minds and bear no grudges. So if we are able to find the balance, then you might understand it when people speak their minds without thinking they are being disrespectful. So it is important to understand the different cultures; otherwise you would have a problem managing such conflicts.

It is apparent that Veronica used the national culture perspective. Like many others who use the national culture lens, she obviously made some generalizations which were not necessarily true. I can emphatically state that most Ghanaians from the northern part of the country are perceived (by southerners) to be very confrontational and have a “rich” war history as a result. However, I could be challenged because of the many sub-cultures within the northern sector of the country. I provide this example not to fall into the same trap of being stereotypical but to show how a nationalistic perspective (Hofstede, 1991; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001) could foster “national cultural
determinism” (McSweeney, 2002). The situation becomes worse if we consider the existence of sub-ethnic cultures within these countries.

Glinka, a Russian professor (site B), like Darab (Iranian), belongs to the other school of thought that national culture does not play a role in conflict control. However, like Edward, Glinka acknowledged the existence of particular national traits and highlighted a few. This is what he had to say:

I think that personal culture is more visible in the way people talk and behave. In Russia, we don’t say hello every time we meet someone. We just say hello once a day to one particular person. But here (in the US) we say hello each time we meet, maybe 5 or 10 times a day. . . . There are such differences. Russians may look less emotional at things or be emotional towards something in a different way from how the American would see it. Russians may not talk so much but Americans may want to discuss things which makes sense because while you are discussing, you are thinking about it. . . . But generally, managing conflicts depends on one’s capabilities or how smart a person is and how smart one’s decision is in getting out of the conflict; how aggressive he is. There are some Russians who are aggressive and there are some who are not at all. Does this make sense to you?

As already mentioned, Glinka acknowledged the national traits by comparing a Russian to an American, both emotionally and cognitively. However, he emphasized that, with conflicts, what happens is all dependent on the personal culture of the individual, a
position that can be challenged by others considering that culture makes a man. As a result, the individual’s choices or behaviors might have been influenced by his/her primary and secondary socializations sub-consciously.

Bruck (site B) also did not subscribe to national characteristics and his response speaks for itself. However, he admitted the possibility of some influence of one’s primary socialization. Bruck stated:

It is not the same thing. Sometimes Israelis are considered to be more direct and I do not necessarily follow this stereotype. . . . Maybe this is in the culture and that is in the direction which might sometimes influence the way that we used to do things.

His statement indicates the possibility of a shift in the national culture or a deviation thereof. A lingering question is: how many of the respondents are/were aware of this latent force (national culture) in their lives?

Like most of the other participants mentioned, Jones (site B) was also skeptical about the role of national culture in how he handles conflict within his organization. This is what he had to say:

I guess I don’t really understand the way my national culture influences the way I behave. But it is interesting to think about it (lots of laughter). I don’t know but I think, and I have spoken to a couple of people who are from Europe about how to get along with the American system. And all the time they seem to be aware that the American would say almost anything to appease you, but at the same time they do not really mean it.
And while they seem to genuinely want to please you, at the end of the day, they stick to what they want to do in the first place. It is difficult to know where the fine line is; with intent and norm; whether it is malicious or not. But it seems a few Europeans are beginning to think that dealing with people is more of an honesty issue while it is different here. Here it is working hard and knowing what the truth is.

**Influence on Group Diversity**

Sixteen of the participants (site A: 9; site B: 7) indicated their nationality did not influence how they were treated by their supervisors and subordinates at their workplace while one expressed a different opinion. The latter, from (site B), argued he was given preferential treatment because of his nationality while the other (site A) argued his colleagues discriminated against him because of his nationality. All others indicated they had not experienced any discrimination.

More often than not, questions like these engender stories about discrimination in social settings. It was interesting to note that only one of the participants felt favored because of his nationality; however, the general response showed that no discrimination was felt by participants in their workplaces. At face value, this development might be attributed to a good organizational culture with set structures that ensure harmony, trust, and respect among its members. Second, this development could be attributed to members’ unwillingness to talk about the issue of discrimination. Third, the development might also be attributed to the type of organization. For instance, within the mid-western university, the structure in place did not necessarily encourage a system where colleagues
within the department will meet. Members had a relatively high degree of autonomy and were not compelled to meet or interact with others. The situation was different at site A where, as a manufacturing enterprise, members were encouraged to work together to maximize productivity. The statement that follows is the response from the only participant (Jones) who felt favored as a result of his nationality.

I do think so. And I think I experience a positive stereotype. I think that people think I am more intelligent than I am and nicer than I am because of my accent and where I come from. And so I think I have benefited from that. I cannot tell you how. I experience that in class with my students when I get my evaluations. I sincerely believe that if I spoke without any kind of English accent at all I am convinced my evaluations will be worse. . . . So I know that these stereotypes exist, some are personal, some are cultural but I do think there is some cultural stereotype (Jones [site B]).

**Influence on Intercultural Conflicts**

Only three participants (site A: 1; site B: 2) could recall a major intercultural conflict they had encountered within their organization. Even then, those from site B did not perceive the conflict as intercultural in anyway. Rather, they described the conflict as professional.

Responses to the incidents of intercultural conflicts experienced were unexpected as the researcher anticipated reports of several such conflicts. Instead, all but one participant reported not experiencing intercultural conflicts at their workplace. When
their response to this question was juxtaposed to other responses to questions about conflict, some contradictions evolved. For instance, even though 95 percent of the respondents indicated they had not experienced any intercultural conflicts, four (all from site A) talked about conflicts they had experienced, citing language barriers as the culprit. However, they did not perceive those conflicts as “intercultural” in nature.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this contradiction. First, participants’ interpretations of what constitutes intercultural conflict could be questioned. Second, and as previously mentioned, the sensitivity of the issue might have influenced participants’ perceptions towards either being indifferent to intercultural conflict or being very sensitive to it. Participants’ understandings of conflict or intercultural issues come into play here. Glinka (site B) responded saying:

We have had some disagreements on the project because, while I wanted it done my way, the other person wanted it done his way. So in the end we combined it, but there was still some conflict. In this case, my Russian nationality was involved in this. I think that my nationality played a part in not discussing the issue in more lengths and depths in trying to convince another guy to understand because I talk less.

Glinka’s response indicates some underlying tension between him and his colleague. Even though they came to a compromise, there was evidence of some residual tension. It is interesting to note that Glinka credits his national culture for helping him overcome the barrier even though he debunked that concept earlier in his response to questions concerning the role national culture plays in organizational conflicts. This, again, raises
an interesting question about people’s cognitive ability to distinguish between the cultures. Robert, an accounts officer (site A), lamented over conflicts he perceived as intercultural. He stated:

So many intercultural conflicts occur here. For example, anytime there is a news item on the instability in Guinea and we come to work, people say we are savages. Some Ivoirians (people from the Ivory Coast) also say that Ghanaians are not emancipated and that people from Guinea like voodoo.

I want to be careful with what Robert refers to as “conflicts” here because they seem more to be silly jokes workers might share among themselves. Even if what Robert is labeling as “conflict” is, in fact, a serious conflict, his description sounded like he was referencing statements that were unintended and non-interactive. Bringing up this kind of situation as an example shows the different levels of perceptions people have of conflict.

Having analyzed and discussed the responses, the issue that needs to be examined here is people’s cognitive ability to determine how and whether their behaviors are influenced by their primary socialization or whether, by this point in their lives, they are completely removed from their primary socialization. I mention primary socialization because that is the level at which individuals learn the practices of their national culture. The other issue to consider is whether the national perspective truly encourages cultural determinism and if that warrants a paradigm shift.
Personal Culture

Recent intercultural research and theory have moved away from, and continue to move away from, explanations that consider only national cultural predictors of human behavior. This position had long been held by notable communication researchers such as Gudykunst and Kim (1997), Gudykunst and Lee (2002), and Samovar and Porter (2000). These scholars opined that both individual and cultural variables influence behavior. Lewis (2006) supported this position when he stated that “the inhabitants of any country possess certain core beliefs and assumptions of reality which will manifest themselves in their behavior. Culture, in the sense that it represents one’s outlook and worldview, is not, however, strictly a national phenomenon” (p. xvii). This position influenced my choice of the three cultures model.

For personal culture, I used the self-construal construct as my frame. This construct refers to people’s beliefs about the relationship between themselves and others, especially the extent to which they perceive themselves as separate from and/or connected with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Consequently, considering one’s personal culture is important.

Influence on Worker Behavior

All participants overwhelmingly agreed that personal culture (self construal) played a major role in how they handled their conflict within their workplaces. Kayla (site A) set the tone, indicating that “almost all that I am doing is based on my personal culture.” Her statement is backed by William (site A) who stated that:
I can be lively; I can be choleric; I can be melancholic. I am still trying to understand myself a little more. When I am in the right crowd I can actually be sanguine; I can be all out. So, even to me, I am still learning about myself. I can actually adapt to any personality traits I want depending on what crowd or environment I find myself. Being like that makes it easy for me when I meet, e.g., someone who does not want to talk, and then I leave the person alone. I can watch TV for 10 hours and not talk to anybody. I can also chat non-stop for hours. I can also be a party person. These have helped me manage conflicts that come my way. I had to go through certain experiences when I was growing up and these have taught me some lessons in life. I was more or less a loner; I used to keep to myself a great deal. But, by the time I was leaving secondary school, I discovered that a lot is needed to change this attitude.


> When persons engage in regulated dealings with each other, they come to employ social routines or practices; patterned adaptations to the rules. . . .

> These variously motivated and variously functioning patterns of actual behavior . . . altogether become part of a social order. (p. x)

William’s response helps us to understand that every phase we go through partially influences our actions and reactions. While William described his adaptability to
situations so as to forestall conflicts, Ayishetu (site A) admitted that organizational influence and personal culture determined her behavior with respect to conflicts.

According to her:

Yes, there is a link to my personality trying to understand the person better. It is also linked to the fact that this organization does not encourage issues of confrontation, so I often end issues there. Having said that, I think my personality plays a major role in how I manage any misunderstandings.

The story is not that different from site B. For example, Kastner (site B) attributed his handling of conflict to his religion as a Christian. Unlike Glinka, who referenced national identity, Kastner did not credit his German origin for how he behaves. He had this to say:

For me, how I manage conflict has more to do with the fact that I am more a Christian than a German. For example, I feel that, as a German, we are known to be more confrontational than typical Americans are. In Germany, it is very okay to tell somebody to go to hell, or tell your opinion about this person to his face; here in America, you have to avoid conflict. So when people see conflict, they go away from each other, yeah, and try to avoid it. But like I said, I avoid conflict as a Christian, unlike the typical German.
Kastner’s response brings to mind the role religion plays in issues of conflict and its repercussions on multicultural organizations. Bruck (site B) had this to say about the role of personal culture:

This definitely has an influence. Personally I try a lot to avoid conflicts as much as possible even though there is a limit to what you can do. But I think in many conflict situations you can avoid a lot of unhelpful tracts of conflicts. But this is very personal. I mean I will not say this is typical.

Jones’ (site B) experience was different and self-explanatory. He stated that:

Basically, I grew up in an environment where my dad and mum didn’t have very good communication skills in retrospect, and whenever conflicts arose (which was quite often), it was serious. We were in financial crisis most of the time, so you would find yelling and screaming, crying and one of them, usually my father, storming out and not coming back for hours. So there were negative outcomes during conflicts. There was never an apology and they were just really bad situations. I do not know how much of that was influencing me, but I basically grew up hating conflicts because I never saw a positive outcome coming from it. I only saw negative outcomes.

Jones’ experience also spoke to how his primary socialization influenced his behavior. As a result, based on his responses to the role of the three cultures, one can safely state that his upbringing and experience within different organizations pushed Jones more
Towards accepting organizational and personal culture as more influential than national culture.

Throughout the interview, Darab (site B) was of the opinion that all our actions were basically influenced by who we were as individuals and nothing else. He stated that “I think it [personal identity] influences it [behavior] a lot. I think it is more of personal characteristics than national characteristics. I want to work with people. I don’t want any fights.”

**Influence on Group Diversity (Teamwork)**

All participants argued that teamwork was important in achieving productivity and, also, that making a choice between working solo or as a team depended on the type of project. However, nine participants (site A) strongly preferred team work to working solo. One participant (site B) also strongly preferred working on team projects. He indicated the importance of team work in achieving efficiency. The other seven participants from site B were not that enthusiastic about team work. The following quotes represent participants’ responses towards teamwork.

William (site A) sincerely believed team work was the way forward. He stated:

If you notice, I have been using the word “we.” It’s about team work.

Team work means you do and I do my bit and pass it on. At various points of the production process, there are people doing their bits to see the ultimate result.

William acknowledged that the type of project or assignment, to a large extent, determines if team work is required. His response to his preference was:
Generally, team work is the best; but, depending on what you are doing at a point in time, you could rather go solo. For instance, there are so many ways of getting into the market to get products across to the final consumer. You may have to develop a plan of getting to the consumer and here people will have diverse views of doing it. What you can do is to get all these views and make a final decision on that, getting on to the best. So here you start with the team work but have to go solo on the final decision.

Similarly, Gunther (site A) expressed a preference for team work because it was the “ultimate choice” in attaining high productivity. His choice might have been influenced by his experience in the manufacturing industry. According to him:

In Syntel, you can never work alone; we all work as a team. We have standards we need to achieve and so we work as a team to achieve those standards. Syntel also encourages initiative, and sometimes, even within a team, you may have to do some individual work and come together as a team to take a final decision on that.

Edward (site A) opined:

[Teamwork is] very important in any organization like this. You can try to go solo but it is important to work with other people. You cannot go solo in this organization. Going solo means not bringing all the stakeholders on board. . . . That is not possible in this organization.
His statement is quite emphatic about teamwork. He posited that “well, maybe, at a higher level than my level, you may be able to do that.”

Like her colleagues, Veronica (site A) supported team work. However, she set the parameters for working within a team:

Like we said, you cannot do everything by yourself. But if you have to do it with other people you’ve got to understand the different natures which will come to play. You need to understand the different backgrounds, how they talk, how they lead others, how they cooperate, etc. If you don’t think about all these things, even if you have a huge team, it won’t work. And people have different strengths okay, and different weaknesses, so somebody’s strength may be another’s weakness. And that is how we move on.

As previously mentioned, participants at site B agreed with those at site A about the importance of team work. However, their statements indicated that working as a team had its challenges. Jones (site B) described one of those challenges:

Let’s see; I would like to think that it means that the individual members of a team contribute equally but differently in the various aspects in what they want to achieve. I sit on a lot of committees and panels and I know that most of the work is done by a few individuals and most of the teams are smaller, I guess. For example, we had a certain year review we had to do in our department so we started off with three committees; like three people from each committee to do the different sections of the review
committee. It ended up with just three members left on the committee to

do the entire thing. In that case, the three of us ended up being a great
team.

For Glinka (site B), team work required know-how in the project and the ability
of the individual to collaborate. She stated:

Team work is people who collaborate with each other, help each other,
they support each other and they try to understand the other person’s
ambition. It really also depends on whether somebody can make a
contribution; if he is able to contribute, then the other question becomes, is
he able to collaborate? I think that you may use less time in doing your
work when others are involved. You also make more friends in
collaboration and have more diverse ideas. But in other situations, the
involvement of other persons may take time and in that case, I would do it
all alone because collaborating here is just not profitable.

Unlike his colleagues, who appreciated the advantages of collaborating on a team,
Tacker (American, site B) had a different experience working with teams and gave a
narration of his preference for working solo:

I prefer working as an individual; it’s easier. Things get muddy in teams.
I’ll tell you some story about that. There is, however, something good
about teamwork. Yeah, there is diversity of ideas and some people think I
don’t consider other ideas, but I do; it’s good to have different ideas. The
problem with teams is when no one can make a decision . . . yes, we live
in a democracy, but if everything is in teams, and builds on teams, then no
decision gets made . . . . So, if you have team work and you reach a
consensus you can get to a point, but the way things get changed and get
done is by one person making a decision. In situations where the teams
have to agree, or return a decision, I often find no decisions or find that
poor decisions have been made.

Tacker’s stance was very personal and did not conform to the norms his
colleagues at site B were used to. Even though others in this group saw the advantages of
team work, Tacker’s diatribe clearly exhibited his dislike for team work. He indicated
that, throughout his childhood, he had been trained to fend for himself and to be
independent; that might have influenced his choice.

**Cultural “Particularisms”**

On the use of first names within organizations, none of the participants (Site A: 10; site B: 8) minded being called by their first names. However, one participant, Glinka
(site B) had some concerns. Participants from site A were accepting of the use of their
first names by colleagues and subordinates because it is part of the organizational culture.
Participants from site B also did not mind because they believed this practice is part of
the national culture. Glinka, however, thought it was disrespectful for subordinates
(students) to call him by his first name. He indicated that the practice encouraged
disrespect within the classroom. Ayishetu (site A) had this to say about forms of address:

I think that when people are addressed with titles like “Mister,” “Doctor,”
or “Professor,” they are not approached by others easily. They [titles]
create a barrier and things are a bit stiff between them. The issue is we stay 8-9 hours at work, so why put in a communication barrier. It is not good enough. So, in Syntel, we all call each other by our first names. You can show respect in several ways. And calling me by my first name does not mean you do not respect me. And addressing people with titles does not also mean you disrespect them.

William (site A) mentioned the use of first names as an organizational practice and also mentioned his personal preference for a title free environment:

No. They [titles] make me feel old and conservative. Maybe if I get my Ph.D. in the next 10 years or so, then, I may have that added to my name. Some people actually want to be addressed with those titles because they add value to them. So far as I am concerned, use of first or last names is not important and it adds nothing. I have seen other organizations where you cannot call your boss by his first name as protocol demands. But whatever it is you still get to do your job. You know, in organizations where they don’t mind how people are called, they still want bosses to be accorded their due respect even though anyone can call them by their first names.

Like William, Gunther (site A) also recognized the practice within the workplace and mentioned some of its advantages:

No, and that is how we do it here in Syntel. The good thing in calling colleagues and bosses by their first names is that it makes the other person
more approachable, communicate freely, and open up to others, no barriers created. It is better than calling people with big titles.

As mentioned earlier, Glinka (site B) argued for the use of titles or full names to help maintain some decorum in the classroom. According to him, that was a practice in Russia that enhanced classroom discipline. His response was as follows:

No. But I like students to call me formally. But when the students are advanced and we collaborate a lot, then they can call me by my first name. If I have a good relationship with graduate students, they can call me by my first name. But if it is in a class, I will not like it because it is just too informal.

Unlike Glinka, Kastner (site B) agreed with most of the participants from site A. “No, not at all. I learned that in Canada. Again, my last name is very difficult for Americans, so they all call me by my first name. So, you see, whatever they call me is not important.”

Like Kastner, most of the others from site B, including Tacker, simply answered “no, not at all.” Jones (site B), who was indifferent to the issue, had this to say:

No. People call me Michael. I tell my graduate students to call me Michael. With the undergraduates, I still hear some of them call me Dr. Jones and I think it is more of a residual effect. I don’t go through the pain of correcting them all the time. I don’t feel right when they call me professor because in my mind I am not a professor yet. I’m kind of half
way in between commanding the respect, but don’t give me too much because I don’t deserve that.

It is interesting to note that workers from collectivistic societies really did not mind being called by their first names mainly because of their organizational culture. In fact, some took it more seriously if they were not addressed by their first names. This finding is in contravention of the high and low power value dimension where individuals from collectivistic cultures are known to experience high power distance unlike their counterparts from low power distance cultures. It is obvious that the organizational culture, in this case, was the determining factor and not the national culture of the workers from site A.

Also, most of the respondents from site B had either been in an individualistic culture for over ten years and might have been familiar with its practices. Yet, the dissenter was from that group. It is important to note, once again, that the type of organization might also have played a role in this direction. It is expedient to consider not only the nationality of the individuals involved in the organization but also the type of organization, the organizational culture, and the personal culture of members of that organization.

**Personal Values vs. General Values**

Sixteen of the participants (site A: 9; site B: 7) indicated they were comfortable with being direct and forthright in their dealings with others, irrespective of their nationality or type of organization. However, all of the participants in site A stated that it depended on the context. Six participants (site A: 4; site B: 2) indicated that tact and
diplomacy are necessary conditions for how people should generally interact with others. Two participants (site A) observed that interactions would or should be different with subordinates than with colleagues, while ten (Site A: 8; Site B: 2) observed that one’s communication would or should be different and more respectful with superiors. According to Ayishetu (site A):

I speak up and don’t mind speaking my mind. But it depends on the nature of the meeting. Meetings where I am not directly responsible for presenting, I don’t speak out as much. But where I am supposed to present my facts I do so openly.

About being forthright, she stated that “I think it all depends on how you present it. You should be tactful and respectful.” Like Ayishetu, William (site A) stated: “Yes, I do not know any other way but to be straight and direct. With colleagues it is very easy; with superiors you need to be tactful. Edward (site A) was relatively careful in his response but also mentioned diplomacy. According to him:

Not all the time. It is a matter of tact and diplomacy. Sometimes being direct may not help the situation so you wait until an opportune time comes your way. With colleagues, we call it “chats.” We have such talks all the time. With subordinates, it is all a relationship building tactic which brings in understanding. And that is why we encourage all to be honest with what we do.

This response from Edward is not surprising considering his stance on being flexible and amenable to situations. However, he makes an interesting class distinction
between dealing with subordinates versus colleagues. Edward is more conscious of his
surroundings which, in turn, affects how he interacts.

Typical of Veronica (site A), she argued that the situation had been enabled by the
organization’s culture. According to her, “if it is your opinion, it is your opinion. Once
you say what you want to say, someone can challenge that and give you a different
opinion. Nobody is scared of speaking their minds here. The environment allows that.”
Would it have been any different if the environment had not allowed it? Would the type
of organization (manufacturing concern) have influenced this phenomenon or was it
generated as a result of language’s constitutive nature?

From site B, all but one of the participants was very comfortable with being
direct. For instance, Kastner had this to say:

That is my preferred mode of working. Actually, I am very disappointed
when people are indirect. In Germany, when I was a young person,
students disliked much of the conversation that was going on because
people were often not direct. I often wondered: why can’t they say what
they really think? Why that kind of background? So I try to be very direct
with my students.

Like Edward (site A), Darab (site B), not surprisingly, also talked about
diplomacy. He had earlier mentioned his dislike for confrontations. He indicated that:

I am direct. But I am direct in a very polite way. I am very diplomatic
when I talk to people. I always have a smile on my face to reduce tension
when I have to talk seriously. I remember we had a professor who was not
doing very well so I went to talk to him to give him another chance. I reduced the tension by smiling and laughing a little bit not to ridicule him but to reduce the tension; but I told him what I wanted to tell him. I think it goes back to my family. I was raised to respect your superiors. I might have a better understanding than the superior, sometimes it is my behavior that will show that, but they don’t turn into conflict.

Bruck (site B) was also concerned about how the issue had to be handled and was sensitive to how he presented his thoughts. He stated:

I’m quite comfortable to be direct even though I also try not to escalate conflicts. So sometimes I would say things directly and smooth them up later. . . . So I will be direct but try to be sensitive and make it clear that this is limited to this particular thing.

Kastner (site B) and Tacker (site B) preferred being direct and did not comment on being diplomatic. However, Bruck (site B; Israel) and Darab (site B; Iran) were more careful in being direct.

Most of the responses from site A, mentioned the need for diplomacy when interacting with others, while not all responses from site B found diplomacy to be as important. The difference could be attributed to some influence of national culture because most of the other respondents, apart from those from Germany and the US, were concerned about being diplomatic in their approach. However, that phenomenon could also be attributed to the personal cultures of the respondents concerned.
**Face Work**

About being commended in public, fourteen participants (site A: 8; site B: 6) did not mind. The other four (site A: 2; site B: 2) were not comfortable with being commended in public. This was another unexpected finding because I expected more participants from site A to be uncomfortable than those from site B when commended in public. The characteristics associated with collectivism and high power distance suggest such a situation. Ayishetu (site A) from Nigeria had this to say:

> I will like it just like everybody likes it. I think that, when we do well, we should be told. This would encourage others to work harder. They would also want to know what I did and how I did it to deserve such praise from the boss. I think it is the best way.

According to William (site A):

> I wouldn’t mind because I want to share that with everybody. But then there may be limits to this. I can be very comfortable talking about my accomplishment with someone whose accomplishments outweighs mine than my own contemporaries or subordinates. This is because you do not want to create some discomfort among them.

Like her colleagues, Mary (site A) saw the move as a positive step in motivating others and also accredited the practice to the organization:

> There are track records, etc. So if every assessment of me confirms that I need to be commended, then naturally, I will be happy to receive the commendation in good faith even in the midst of my colleagues. This is
an environment where encouragement is promoted. So if people need to be commended they are commended but what we don’t encourage is discouraging people by announcing publicly that they have not done well; it is not done here.

Unlike her colleagues, Veronica (site B) was mindful of how it was done being conscious of the group dynamic and how the public commendation could negatively influence that dynamic:

It depends on how you do it. This is because whatever was achieved was a team effort. So I would prefer that the team is praised rather than single me out for praise. Now, the avenues might not always be there to praise the whole team. Well, if it is an email to praise . . . for the good work done, that is good and I can share with the team and say this is what the boss says. If you don’t share the credit with the team, you would get to a situation where you will not get their full cooperation.

Interestingly, participants from site B liked public commendation and yet minded how it was presented. This could be attributed to the institutional type and/or to whether it was an organizational practice to commend colleagues in public. Even though the practice, according to Mary (site A), was organizational, the same could not be said of participants on site B probably because of the relative autonomy experienced. For example, Kastner (site B) stated that “I’d rather not but (laughs) it’s, in a way . . . I like it, right? It’s a great feeling being commended that you’ve done something outstanding, but I am not a very public person you know.”
Darab’s (site B) response was interesting and surprising because of his profession. He stated that he was all right with public commendation “as long as I don’t have to stand in the podium to face people. I like to teach, but I don’t like to give a speech. I hate that.” It must be noted here that Darab has taught and lived in the US for thirty years and could be thought to have been fully assimilated into the society. However, his personal culture seems to be the determinant in most of his dealings; and he attests to that fact. Could his stance be attributed to the nebulous culture found in the US? Or could it be his personal choice to stay distanced from US culture?

Garcia (site B) from Chile mentioned similar concerns. She did not necessarily like being commended publicly because she was a shy individual. “I am sort of shy when it comes to public demonstration of deeds, be it professionally or other forms of charity work. One does them because it is one’s duty anyway.” Again, one could ask whether her uneasiness was a result of her national or personal culture.

Jones’ (site B) response was also self-explanatory and interesting:

No I don’t mind being commended. I am not comfortable with that but deep down inside it is ok; I like it. I think that there are people that deserve being commended in front of everyone else but they do not get the congratulations that they deserve. I guess I have never thought of people who don’t like that.

Jones’ response shows some internal dialectic between his individuality and society. He, at one time, is uncomfortable and does not mind; yet, deep down, he loves it. His experience might be a more realistic presentation of what often happens with
others. His experience could also be attributed to his multicultural experience and sensitivity to it.

I end this finding with Tacker’s statement that “I love that” (big grin on the face). Based on Tacker’s responses to other questions, it is not surprising at all that he loves public commendation. He enjoys individually-focused work and that sense of personal accomplishment that comes with individual success.

**Self Identity**

Sixteen participants (Site A: 8; Site B: 8) described themselves as multicultural mostly due to their secondary experience either during their years in college or during their working period where they had traveled to other countries. This question was asked to avoid the researcher’s assumptions about participants’ identity. Interestingly, sixteen participants responded that they perceived themselves to be multicultural rather than mono-cultural. Their reasons, as stated earlier, were generally because they had been to numerous countries and places where they had imbibed different aspects of those cultures. Thus, they believed they were more multicultural and, therefore, more accepting of the other.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented key findings from this research. Data from individual interviews revealed research participants’ perceptions and experiences of the Three Cultures Model. To enable their voices to be heard, samples of participants’ quotations were included to accurately represent the reality and experience of the participants. There were three primary findings.
First, organizational culture was perceived to have immense influence on how organizational members handled their conflict. In certain circumstances, participants had to be assisted with identifying what organizational culture meant. Participants’ from both sites acknowledged that their organization’s culture played a role in how they handled their conflicts.

Second, participants found it difficult to discern and/or explain the influence of national culture on their behaviors. Perhaps at least in part for that reason, national culture was perceived as playing a minor role in how organizational members handled their conflicts.

Third, participants generally indicated that their personal culture had tremendous influence on how they, as organizational members, handled their conflicts. This was determined by having participants self identify culturally based differences in their perceptions, motivations, and behaviors.

These findings corroborate the need for scholars and practitioners alike to pay more attention to the variable influence of the *three cultures* on organizational membership behavior during conflict situations. It is a clarion call for scholars and practitioners alike to move away from the status quo of using national culture as the sole determinant when discussing an organizational members’ behavior.
Chapter Five: Discussions

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine and understand whether, from their point of view, workers’ conflict styles in a multicultural organization were influenced by any or all of three cultural factors, namely: the organization’s culture, the national culture of the organization’s members, and the employee’s personal culture (self construal). It is hoped that a better understanding of this phenomenon could serve as an insight for scholars and practitioners alike, challenging the traditional view of culture within an organization as an endstate rather than an evolving social structure. The objective would be to encourage scholars to adopt a macro-level approach to understanding intercultural conflicts within multicultural organizations. It is my belief that this paradigm shift will not only eschew national cultural determinism (McSweeney, 2002), but will reify the constitutive role of communication.

To accomplish these objectives, this research, using a case study method, collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. Finding organizations that were willing to participate in the study was a herculean task. However, I eventually found two that were not only willing but also accessible. Of the two, one was a for-profit manufacturing concern in West Africa, and the other was a mid-western university in the US.

Participants included eighteen adult workers. All eight from the university (site B) were faculty members with ranks ranging from professor to assistant professor. The other participants were workers of the manufacturing unit (site A). Of the ten workers, there
were four senior managers, two line managers, and four junior officers. The data were
coded, analyzed, and organized by research questions and categories.

Major findings of the study revealed that, while ninety percent of the participants
agreed that organizational culture had a great influence on how they handled their
conflicts within the organization, only twenty percent believed that national culture had
some influence on how they handled their conflicts. With respect to personal culture, all
eighteen participants agreed that personal culture was the most influential cultural
construct in how they handled their conflicts.

This chapter discusses and synthesizes the findings using analytic categories
related to the key research questions. This is followed by interpretations and relevant
supporting literature. The chapter further discusses implications and limitations of the
study and proposes suggestions for future research.

RQ1: What roles do members of a multicultural organization think organizational culture
plays in how conflict is handled within their organization?

**The Role of Organizational Culture on Workers’ Conflict Behaviors**

Participants’ responses to questions concerning the influence of organizational
culture on how organizational members handle their conflict situations were nearly
unanimous. Sixteen out of the eighteen participants indicated that organizational culture
plays a key role in how conflict situations in multicultural organizations are handled.
Their responses were not surprising and were in line with Schein’s (1985) definition of
organizational culture. According to Schein, organizational culture is composed of
“patterns of basic assumptions” that are collectively developed and authenticated by
members of the organization “as the correct way to perceive, think and feel” (p. 385). It is important to note that, because of its sense of shared quality, and interpretive cultural role (Adler & Jelinek, 2000), organizational cultural influence, if any, on organizational members could be enduring.

Organizational culture, in my opinion, is composed of contributions from both management and workers. For lack of a better word, a process of structuration occurs, borne out of the mundane practices and interactions of organizational members, and the primary goals and directions of management (structures). Adler and Jelinek (2000) described the process as an “emergent collectivity” (p. 34) because the processes and relationships seen within any operational organization are not the sole creation of management. Peters and Waterman (cited by Adler & Jelinek) explained that “while subject to managerial control, such a collective culture is by no means simply determined by managerial intentions, nor is it quickly changeable by management fiat” (p. 34). I argue that the collective culture/s enabled by the constitutive role of communication bring about that overarching influence on members’ behavior, irrespective of their nationality.

Generally, ninety percent of participants acknowledged the powerful influence of organizational culture on the organization’s members. In spite of the type of organization (for-profit or public), participants indicated that their behavior had generally changed as a result of the culture within their organizations. For example, Sophia’s (site A) response sums it all up. In her opinion, her organization’s culture is:

Shaped by personality both within the organization and outside the organization. I would say the organizational culture does not encourage
conflicts. Left to my own personality, I would have fought back. . . . In fact my attitude is such that I am called “small pepper” (lots of laughter)

Sophia’s statement was supported by two other participants, Ayishetu and Mary (site A), who commented on how their organization’s culture had “enabled members to work freely under flexible conditions and how structures put in place to manage conflicts and grievances were working effectively.”

The duality of structure (structuration) was clearly manifested at both research sites where the organizational and social structures in place enabled social action. From site B, participants acknowledged the importance of organizational culture, with some citing mundane practices within the organization and the influence of those mundane practices on them. For example, Bruck (a professor who was a native of Israel) commented that, by being entrusted with a key to his department building, he felt a sense of trust and belonging within the organization which motivated him to give his best.

The considerable influence of organizational culture on its employees (Smit, 2001) was manifested in this research. This influence helped promote collegiality and also increased efficiency at the workplace. Findings in this study supported the assertion that organizational culture often prescribes and proscribes particular behaviors of members within and outside the institution (Witte & Van Muijen, 1999). Another finding that reverberated across participants’ responses was the issue of trust within the organization.
**Trust**

Eight participants (site A: 7; site B: 1) indicated that trust was an important ingredient to maintaining cohesion within the workplace. All seven participants from site A expressed the belief that their organization played a key role in promoting trust and collegiality. For example, Gunther (Swiss manager, site A) indicated that, in Syntel, “we promote trust, respect for each other, clarity of issues and communication, action, and innovation.” Kayla (African junior officer, site A) stated that: “The company has four core values it tends to promote: Trust, respect, action and clarity.” Bruck (site B) was the only participant who mentioned the importance of trust in the university.

Mayer, Davies, and Schoorman (1995) wrote about the importance of trust in situations where workers were bounded in space. The “containment” necessitates some level of interdependence among workers which enable them realize their personal and organizational objectives. Any deviation from fostering interdependence could result in broken trust which, in turn, could negatively affect productivity. The need to build trust and encourage interdependence among workers within the organization could be an influential factor in organizational members’ behavior, especially in site A and especially regarding conflict. The need to build trust could also motivate organizational members to develop in-group qualities and not divulge any information that could negatively affect the group.

**Organizational Culture and Group Diversity**

Group interaction was found to be prevalent in both organizations, but more so for site A than site B. Findings supported the notion that organizational culture had a great
influence on group dynamics. All participants (site A: 10; site B: 8) indicated that the
diversity of a group did not make any difference to the way they would approach or
handle projects. According to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001), intercultural conflict
management must consider “how individuals draw in-group-out-group boundaries, how
they perceive the nature of their relationship, and how they evaluate the different goal
types” (p. 38). Ting-Toomey and Oetzel describe “in-groups” as groups of individuals
who care about the welfare of an identified person, and reciprocate gestures of
willingness to cooperate unconditionally. On the other hand, “out-groups” are groups of
individuals perceived to be disconnected, unequal, or somehow threatening. According
to Triandis (1995), out-groups have different attributes which often conflict with one’s
in-group norms.

Even though in-groups (and, by extension, out-groups) were existent in my
findings, especially at site A between French- and English-speaking workers, there was no
evidence of any significant division among the groups. Rather, the organizational
objective seemed to trump everything else. In both cases, this phenomenon could be
attributed to the strong influence of organizational culture as was evidenced by some of
their responses. William (site A) had this to say:

Professionalism is the key word. Everyone around here tries to be as
professional as possible which is most true for a place like Syntel. This is
because we have people coming from all kinds of countries and cultures.
So the only thing that actually binds them together is professionalism.
Gunther, a co-worker at site A, stated, “because we work with people of different cultures and backgrounds, we give others the benefit of the doubt.” These comments spoke to the mindset of site A participants throughout the interview process. These statements support the influence of organizational culture on members’ interactions.

Again, participants’ comments about diversity showed their awareness of the diversity around them. This consciousness possibly created the need for participants to be sensitive in their interactions with their colleagues. This is evidenced by Edward’s comment that “here in Syntel, we put emphasis on mutual respect among co-workers irrespective of one’s gender, culture, or nationality.” Mary (a senior manager in Human Resources) stated that, “as an organization . . . we are aware of the fact that we have diversity. So, as much as possible, we trust one another while we also try to understand one another.”

I provided these quotes to support my argument that the constitutive role of communication and the duality of structures go a long way in helping “bounded” members of an organization create a third culture that is feasible, productive, and devoid of in-group/out group chasms, the latter often being creations of group members’ nationalities.

Participants’ responses also supported a social constructivist view that organizational members have the ability to foster a third culture that focuses on a common and mutual objective. The in-group I referred to earlier (site A) better describes a functional group than a dysfunctional one. The French/English dichotomy among workers from Syntel was only perceived by participants as a communication difficulty,
not as conflict per se. According to Triandis (1995), members of collectivistic cultures make a greater distinction between in-groups and out-groups than do members of individualistic cultures. This was not supported in my research. The determining factor for behavior was the organizational culture and not the national heritage of members of the organization.

From site B, the situation was somewhat different. Even though all participants showed some enthusiasm about collegiality within the establishment, some did not feel it was that relevant. For example, Tacker had this to say: “I think that this unit tries to promote collegiality and cooperation institutionally. In practical terms, I don’t know whether they have really achieved that.” In response to a related question about organizational efforts to promote collegiality, Tacker’s response showed a level of apathy or aloofness to the process, “Institutionally they have a thing called faculty meetings where people here are supposed to interact, but sometimes they do and sometimes they don’t.” These responses could be excused coming from one participant. However, the comments nonetheless highlight a sense of skepticism among some participants from site B unlike those from site A, where trust and respect were almost required.

Four of the site B faculty members who acknowledged the important role of organizational culture compared their organizational culture to that of other institutions and not only acknowledged, but also appreciated, the difference between their current institution and other institutions at which they have worked. Like participants from site A, seven site B participants did not have any qualms about working on group projects. However, unlike Syntel participants, site B participants were not as excited about
working as a team. Their reasons ranged from “it depends on the type of project assigned” to the timeline of the project. Four participants (site B) said they would rather go solo on a project depending on the deadline while one site B participant, Tacker (American), strongly preferred working solo based on his past experience working in teams. He alleged that team work slowed decisions and even when decisions were made, they were often “poor” ones. In all, about eighty percent of participants from both sites indicated that the diversity of a group did not make any difference because of their organizational culture.

**Disclosure or Avoidance**

Seven out of ten participants from site A had experienced communication difficulties which focused more on use of language than anything else. According to Wittgenstein (1978), languages are essentially connected to our forms of life and, as a result, need some acknowledgment. The seven participants lamented about “conflicts” they had encountered with their colleagues because of language differences. While some were relational conflicts, most were task-related. Veronica’s (site A) response presents a good example. “Of the countries that we represent only 2 of them are English speaking i.e., Ghana and Nigeria. The rest are all Francophone. So sometimes our understanding of things might differ.” She goes on to explain what often happens. “Someone is instructing somebody to work and because that person does not actually understand the language, he goes ahead and does something else.”

As already mentioned, this experience was common among members from site A. However, none of them described this as an intercultural conflict. When juxtaposed
against participants’ own definition of conflict, it begged the question why they did not perceive those encounters as intercultural conflicts. Was this because of an obligation to maintain trust, or a need to nurture interdependence, or the influence of organizational culture, or could it simply be an avoidance of (or aversion to) conflict?

Globalization, in modern times, has led to increases in levels of conflict and misunderstanding among coworkers. Unfortunately, organizational members typically find task and relationship conflicts frustrating, and just wish they did not exist (Cramton, 2001; Susman, Gray, Perry, & Blair, 2003). According to Ren and Gray (2009), two modal responses often used in organizations when conflicts occur are: (1) scape-goating (“writing off” a team member as the culprit and concluding “that person just won’t change”) or (2) withdrawing and sweeping the conflict under the table as if nothing happened. The latter approach assumes that the conflict’s effects on task work will be negligible. Their statement is supported by Lipsky and Seeber (2006) who stated, “both scholars and practitioners have observed that avoiding or ignoring workplace disagreements is a common practice in most organizations” (p. 362).

My findings supported this statement. About ninety percent of the participants showed possible signs of eluding the conflict topic. According to Ting-Toomey (1988), avoidance is a conflict style that involves eluding the conflict topic, the conflict party, or the conflict situation altogether. Even though all participants acknowledged the existence of conflict within organizations, none of them acknowledged experiencing any intercultural conflict within their organization. All eighteen participants looked uncomfortable responding to this question, and hesitantly responded in the negative when
the question came up. For example, Tacker’s (site B) response aptly represented what all other participants stated: “I don’t see intercultural conflict here. I mean, I have seen a lot of conflict. There were a lot of issues, but I don’t think they were necessarily intercultural.”

This response stimulates interesting discussions about conflict avoidance and eluding topics on conflict. As stated earlier, almost all participants had experienced personal and task-related conflicts. Five participants from site A had experienced communication difficulties with other colleagues who were either French or English speaking. Tacker had experienced communication difficulties with other colleagues from different countries because, according to him, “you don’t have the basis or the knowledge for their sort of cultural experiences.” It was interesting to note that participants who had experienced communication difficulties with colleagues from other countries did not consider those experiences as forms of intercultural conflict. Consequently, it could be argued that how organizational members’ perceived a phenomenon (conflict) played a major role in determining how they would handle that situation within the organization.

To buttress my point, I use Tacker’s self explanatory statement: “The main reason why disputes arise is usually a fundamental problem in communication where the message sent is not received and sometimes with people from other cultures, it’s difficult to understand the context in which they’re speaking. . . .” Having stated this earlier in the interview, he still indicated he had not experienced any intercultural conflicts within the organization. Like Tacker, five participants at site A responded in the negative even though they had had communication difficulties. Edward’s response to whether he had
experienced an intercultural conflict was: “not really, there is mutual understanding and respect.” Mary, also from site A, replied: “Absolutely not.”

The behavior of these participants, in my opinion, was more suggestive of eluding conflict than avoiding conflict. I draw a distinction between the two because I perceive the former as passive and the latter as active. To explain further, literally turning away from a conflict situation (e.g., deliberately missing a meeting, avoiding eye contact, turning away from someone) is not the same as not acknowledging the situation exists. In my opinion, the elusion seemed to be more of an effort to maintain cohesion and build trust in the organizations than anything else. For example, participants generally did not acknowledge experiencing intercultural conflicts in both organizations. This is believable considering that more than sixty percent of them indicated they did not mind being direct and upfront when communicating with colleagues. From their responses, one could argue that they would have been comfortable confronting their colleagues.

Again, their responses could have been influenced by the trust they had built over time because of their need for interdependence (Mayer et al., 1995). Putnam (2006) commented on the mix of cooperation and competition workers within multicultural organizations encountered. According to her, workers within such organizations need each other to accomplish tasks and develop working relationships. As a result, it is not easy for such employees to simply walk away from disagreements without having the conflict recur. This phenomenon could create tension within the workplace as workers are expected to cooperate and compete simultaneously to manage their organizational conflicts. It needs to be emphasized that such dialectics of cooperation and competition
could affect workers interactions and probably explains why participants were unwilling
to disclose any intercultural conflicts. According to Folger, Poole, and Stutman (2005),
workers within such multicultural organizations might withhold information, feel
distrustful, and fear exploitation. However, I argue that the need to cooperate probably
pushes members of the organization to share information, develop trust, and avoid
escalation of conflict. That said, the question remains: Were they being truthful in their
responses or failing to disclose?

Disclosure

Even though participants’ responses might be true, sharing information with an
outsider (researcher) can have its own consequences. According to Petronio (2002) “to
tell or not to tell is a condition frequently faced by individuals” (p. 1). The dialectic of
withholding versus sharing information in an organizational setting might necessitate the
“coordination of collectively owned boundaries” (p. 4). Not being part of that unit,
according to Petronio’s Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory, could have
influenced participants’ willingness to disclose the existence of any intercultural conflicts
within their organizations. This is because there could be “risks that include making
private disclosures to the wrong people or at the wrong time” (p. 3). That
notwithstanding, the sensitivity of the issue within multicultural organizations could also
have been a factor.

In sum, my findings were consistent with Folger et al. (2005) and Putnam’s
(2006) conclusions that members within bounded spaces might find it necessary to
promote trust, interdependence, and collegiality to avoid entropy. The findings were also
consistent with the CPM theory. However, they were not consistent with Hofstede’s (1991) and Ting-Toomey and Oetzel’s (2001) theory of cultural dimensions. This was because all participants who reported avoiding conflict situations were not only from both collectivistic and individualistic societies but indicated that their choice was influenced by their personal experiences, especially during their primary socialization.

RQ2: What roles do members of a multicultural organization think national culture plays in how conflict is handled within their organization?

**Catalytic Properties of National Culture**

It is admittedly true that national cultures evolve from political, educational, social, and legal structures that are established in a system of references. These structures influence socialization processes of citizens through cultural presentations and, then, change into specific cultures of particular societies (Osland & Bird, 2000). Simply put, people inherit shared meaning frames (national cultures) from the countries in which they are socialized; however, due to human agency, these shared frames become contextually dynamic. Even though national culture and organizational culture play a major role in organizations and in defining appropriate organizational behavior, most studies in this area have either focused on how organizational cultures mirror their host countries (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) or have looked at cultural value dimensions (Hofstede, 1991; Schwarz, 2006; Triandis, 1995).

My findings for question two showed some bias (from participants) against the influence of national cultures on how organizational members handle conflict situations. On the whole, the findings support the notion that the averages of a country do not relate
to the individuals of that country (Gerhart, 2008). The findings also reveal participants’ struggles with determining the difference between what constitutes national culture versus personal culture. In my opinion, the influence of national culture was latent and, therefore not easily discernible. National culture presented itself as a catalyst in influencing organizational behavior.

**Influence of National Culture**

Of the eighteen participants, only four (20%; site A: 1; site B: 3) indicated that national culture plays *some* role in how they handle conflicts. I highlight “some” because all four participants were uncertain in their responses. The difficulty appeared to stem from participants’ determination of whether their national culture influenced their personal culture. For example Garcia (Chilean professor) stated that:

> Yeah, I think that it (national culture) plays *probably* (emphasis mine) a big role you know. I mean (one eye shut), I don’t know. You have to really think about that. (Pause) I’ll say it probably plays a big role because of certain ways that you are raised--you are educated--your interaction with people as you grow up. I’ll say it probably plays a big role.

In her response to a related question concerning national culture, Garcia’s response differed on her concept about the role of national culture:

> If I went and were having this conversation in the south west, it will be very different than if it were Chicago. It will also be different if it were South Miami. It depends on where because the topography of the people
and what they eat, and how they live all depends. So you know it’s a very large country . . . and you know there isn’t one national identity.

Garcia’s dilemma in determining the difference between national and personal culture was echoed by three other participants, all of whom indicated that national culture had some influence on conflict style. For instance, Jones (English professor) remarked: “I guess I don’t really understand the way my national culture could influence the way I behave. But it is interesting to think about it (lots of laughter).”

I believe the difficulty stems from the notion that national culture and personal culture are correlated. One’s personal culture is greatly influenced by his/her national culture because, during their primary and secondary socialization processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), much of what will be learned will be influenced by family values which, in turn, will probably have been influenced by national culture (national traits). Of the fourteen participants who did not perceive national culture as influencing their conflict style, they all acknowledged they had national traits and referred to them (used them) when describing their other work colleagues. How their nationality could influence their behavior during a conflict seemed to be their dilemma. A quote that succinctly represented the overarching finding regarding this question came from Edward, a senior manager (site A). According to him:

I do not think one’s national culture is significant in the way we resolve conflicts. Whatever your culture, so far as you take employment into a multi-national environment, you would conform to the culture of that environment. . . . If anything else, national and organizational cultures
may complement each other. Otherwise, I do not see how a national
culture can actually impact on our organizational behavior.

Edward’s response mirrors the findings from research conducted by Gerhart and Fang
(2005). In their research, they examined the fundamental assumptions that emphasized
the importance of national cultural differences in international management and re-
analyzed other findings from previous studies, such as Hofstede’s (1980), to test those
assumptions. They found, within Hofstede’s data, that the national culture of workers
accounted for a small amount of variance in respondents’ values. Comparatively,
organizational culture accounted for more variance. In their conclusion, they stated that,
although the culture and habits of a nation were worth considering in international human
resource management, the results of their analyses suggested that organizational culture
was much more important when considering how to manage diversity in organizations.

**National Culture and Identity**

The concept of national culture since Hofstede’s (1980) study has, in my opinion,
not only influenced scholarship and organizational management but also influenced
people’s mindsets about their identity. As mentioned earlier, more than half of the
participants’ reactions to the idea were interesting. Two participants (site A: 1; site B: 1)
did not allow me to finish the question. Instead, they were quick to suggest that how they
handled themselves during conflict situations was solely dependent on who they were as
individuals. For example, Glinka (a Russian professor) began shaking his head before I
finished my question, retorting that “personal culture is more visible in the way people
talk and behave.” Like Garcia, he was not certain of the influence of national culture and responded to a related question stating:

I have had some disagreements on a project because, while I wanted it done my way, the other person wanted it done his way. So, in the end, we combined it, but there was still some conflict. In this case, my Russian nationality was involved in this. I think that my nationality played a part in not discussing the issue in more lengths and depths in trying to convince another guy to understand because I talked less.

Bruck’s (Israeli professor) demeanor changed when I asked the question and with a forceful (almost raised) voice stated: “it is not the same thing. Israelis are considered more direct and I do not follow this stereotype.” He continued by saying that “personally, I try a lot to avoid conflicts as much as possible even though there is a limit to what you can do. . . . But this is very personal; I mean I will not say this is typical.” The above quotations represent majority of respondents’ views on the concept.

I mentioned earlier how the concept of national culture after Hofstede’s (1980) study had influenced people’s mindset. This has led to entrenched stereotypes, as was evidenced throughout my research. My findings showed that participants’ perceptions of national culture were stereotypical to a fault. For instance, in spite of the participants’ dislike for being identified by their nationality, they inadvertently described their colleagues and, in some cases, themselves with the same prescribed labels. For example Jones’ (English professor) had this to say about his identity. “I don’t know what my nationality is anymore (laughter). When I get home (England), everyone I speak to
ths I am an American because I sound like that to them.” This was not different from site A where Veronica (a Ghanaian worker) was very stereotypical in her comments about her colleagues. Being Ghanaian, she believed Ghanaians were “hospitable and non-confrontational” while others from “Francophone countries, like Senegal and Mali, were aggressive and confrontational.” Adama (line manager from Mali) believed Ghanaians were “inward and unfriendly.” These prescribed identities were used unintentionally but frequently by participants from both sites. In my opinion, all citizens of a country do not fit the descriptions or the labels assigned them by the ubiquitous cultural dimensions. We all carry individualist and collectivistic tendencies (Triandis, 1995). These dimensions not only encourage “national cultural determinisms” (McSweeney, 2002) but also encourage stereotypes that have become an anathema to human agency.

RQ3: What roles do members of a multicultural organization think personal culture plays in how conflict is handled within their organization?

**Human Agency and its Exigencies**

Recently, many authors (e.g., McSweeney, 2002; Nordby, 2008; Schwartz, 2003) have criticized the use of broad cultural variability dimensions. This is because of the rise of globalization and multiculturalism. For instance, my findings showed that sixteen out of eighteen participants (Site A: 8; site B: 8) described themselves as multicultural because of their primary, secondary, and tertiary socializations. Consequently, their personal values have evolved and, ostensibly, are not associated with broad cultural dimensions.
According to Raz (2003), personal values are attitudes concerning “ways of living.” Assigning a personal value is not different from assigning a direct relation between a person and his/her environment. On the contrary, what broad cultural dimensions do is to ascribe a general state to that individual. When personal values are assigned, those values must relate directly to what those individuals esteem. This notion was supported by Nordby (2008) when he posited that, “when broad dimensions such as individualism–collectivism or high versus low context are invoked to account for cultural differences, it is uncertain exactly how or why these differences occur” (Nordby, 2008, p. 149).

**Influence of Personal Culture**

Findings as to the role played by personal culture in how workers handle their conflict were overwhelmingly positive. All of the eighteen participants agreed that their personal culture plays a major role in this endeavor. This was not unexpected considering how participants’ responded to the role of national culture on their identity. As William (site A) stated, “It is very personal. I can be lively . . . choleric . . . or melancholic.” These latter moods can determine how he reacts to a conflict situation. He continued by stating, “I can actually adapt to any personality traits I want depending on what crowd or environment I find myself.” It is however expedient to state that, although responses from the participants were overwhelming positive, Eight (site A) indicated that a combination of personal and organizational culture influence their behavior while two indicated that they were influenced solely by personal culture. From site B, the response
was overwhelmingly supportive of the major role of personal culture. Their responses did not reflect much influence from organizational culture.

These differences in participants’ perceptions could be attributed to the type of organization in which they found themselves. While the influence of organizational culture was heavily felt on site A (probably because it was a manufacturing concern), participants from site B, an educational institution, enjoyed more autonomy and expressed strong beliefs that personal culture has more influence on the handling of organizational conflicts. For example, Kastner (German professor) believed his Christian values (personal culture) were the sole determinant and not organizational culture or national culture. Jones (an English professor) avoided violence altogether because of his experiences growing up. In all, participants’ responses acknowledged some form of human agency.

**Human Agency**

According to Bandura (2000), to be an agent is to intentionally influence one’s functioning and life circumstances. As a result, “personal influence becomes part of the causal structure. People are . . . not simply onlookers of their behavior; they are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them” (p. 164). Consequently, agency involves “not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but also the ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution” (p. 165).

Participants’ reactions to this and other related questions mirrored Bandura’s (2000) social cognitive theory on agency. For instance, participants who indicated that
their actions were all due to their personal values vehemently denied any influence of either organizational culture or national culture. The emerging trend was that participants from site B, more so than those from site A, thought their actions were statements about their own initiatives and values. Only Glinka (Russian) partially attributed some of the influence to national culture. From site A, even though all participants attributed their reactions to conflict to their personal values, as exhibited by William’s quote, they also, as previously mentioned, attributed their responses to their organization’s culture. This was probably because most “human pursuits involve other participating agents, so there is no absolute agency” especially within bounded organizations like Syntel. As a result, individuals who work in such organizations often have to be mindful of their self-interests if they are to achieve unity of effort within diversity (Bandura, 2000). Unlike Syntel, the university setting did not necessarily promote or encourage interdependence and possibly explains the difference in their responses to the question on personal culture.

**Cultural “Particularisms”**

I coin the word “particularisms” to describe some findings about participants’ mundane behaviors and reactions within their organizations. These behaviors included participants’ comfort levels at being called by their first names, at being direct and forthright with other organizational members, and their reactions to being commended in public. My interest in these behaviors was engendered by the generalizations accompanying the *cultural value dimensions* led by proponents such as Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), Hofstede (1991), Ting-Toomey (1999), and Triandis (1995).
The findings concerning the behaviors just mentioned clearly did not support the cultural value dimensions theory. For instance, nine of the participants (site A), who were all from collectivist societies, were more accepting of the use of their first names by their colleagues. According to the power distance dimension, most members from collectivist societies experience high power distance meaning that subordinates submit to their supervisors in authority. As a result, the rapport between them is tense. The tradition of calling others by their first name (according to the power distance dimension) is more prevalent in individualist societies with low power distance. Findings from site B, however, did support this theory. Apart from Glinka (Russian professor), all others were comfortable being called by their first name. This finding was an eye-opener to me because (based on my experience), calling others by their last names in organizations used to be the practice about a decade ago. However, as I have reiterated throughout this research, globalization has rapidly changed the status quo in organizations and institutions; rendering it necessary for scholars to reexamine the evolution.

**Face-Work**

Findings from the study touched on some aspects of face negotiation theory but did not necessarily support the theory. All members of a society do some face work (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Goffman, 1959). Face-work refers to a set of “communicative behaviors that people use to regulate their social dignity and to support or challenge the other’s social dignity” (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi 1998). This theory has been linked to complimenting, politeness, and embarrassment issues to mention a few. As is the practice, Ting-Toomey (1988) used a cultural variability approach of
individualism–collectivism to study face and face-work and explained why face-work was culture sensitive. She posited that individualism basically referred to the broad value tendencies of a culture in emphasizing the importance of “I” identity over “we” identity, and personal self-esteem issues over social self-esteem issues. Simply put, people from individualist societies would prefer public commendation to those from collectivist societies.

As mentioned, twelve participants (site A: 8; site B: 4) did not mind being commended in public. Based on the theory, all or more participants from site A should have been concerned about being commended in public. Alternatively, all or more than four participants from site B should have been welcoming of the idea to be commended in public. Participants’ explanations for their choices were based on their personal values more than their organizational or national values.

**Power Distance**

Power distance, simply put, seeks to demonstrate the extent to which subordinates or ordinary citizens submit to authority. According to Hofstede (1991), power distance is low in westernized countries where power between subordinates and supervisors is relatively low and high in developing countries where the opposite is the case. Therefore, most individualist societies experience low power distance while most collectivist countries experience high power distance.

While some findings of this study depicted some participants as avoiding conflict, that avoidance was not based on whether participants came from individualist versus collectivist societies. Instead, the findings revealed that participants’ avoidance of
conflict was based solely on their personal values and, in a few cases, their organizational culture as well.

**Personal Values vs. General Values**

Understanding what personal values an individual possesses is not equivalent to understanding the general values in which he believes (Nordby, 2008). Personal values are directly related to actions we take, or would like to take, in connection to specific circumstances. This is unlike general values, which can be likened to our beliefs and worldviews. I emphasize this notion because of my findings about participants’ comfort levels with being direct and forthright (with other organizational members), irrespective of their positions within the organization. Again, my findings did not support the cultural value dimension theory of uncertainty/avoidance where people from individualistic cultures are more direct and confrontational while others from collectivistic societies avoid confrontation/differences.

Findings indicated that sixteen of the participants (site A: 9; site B: 7) were comfortable with being direct and forthright in their dealings with others irrespective of their nationality or type of organization. It should be noted that nine out of ten participants (site A), all from collectivist cultures, were included in this response. This finding supports Wittgenstein’s (1980) philosophy that, as human beings, we esteem our personal values because they are essentially connected to our forms of life (interests we have and activities we like to do).
Perception of Conflict

Sixteen of the participants (site A: 9; site B: 7), irrespective of their national heritage, thought conflict could be good or bad depending on the situation or circumstance. This finding did not support the theory of avoidance of conflict by people from collectivistic societies. Extant literature on conflict suggests that avoiding conflict is more prevalent in collectivist societies than in individualistic societies where conflict is perceived to be negative and not positive (e.g., Hofstede, 1991; Ting-Toomey, Gao, Trubisky, Yang, Kim, Liu et al., 1991). Even though most participants from site A are from collectivistic societies, all but one of them believed that conflict could be positive as well as negative.

The situation was similar for members from site B which was situated in a region known to be individualistic. Its members were from different countries but had lived in the US for a minimum of three years and a maximum of thirty years. Responses from both sites, A and B, did not support the cultural values dimensions theory. Rather, the results supported Triandis’ (1995) statement that all individuals carry both individualist and collectivist tendencies, and that the determination of whether conflict was positive or negative was situational. It stands to reason that, although conflict within organizations is often perceived as maladaptive and hurtful to both the institution and its employees, that is not always the case (Argyris, 1957).

Implications of Study

First, the importance of the influence of organizational culture on organizational behavior cannot be overemphasized as was evidenced by my findings as well as other
research (e.g., Gerhart & Fang, 2005). Organizational culture evolves through an “emergent collectivity” process, a duality of structures where both management and workers using interactional rules and communicative resources available contribute. By these interactions, workers develop a sense of personal efficacy and commitment to the organization’s objectives. It is imperative that organizational managers and scholars alike should be conscious of the structuration process to put in place enabling policies that enhance and reify the process. This is recommended because people are partially the products of their environments. By enabling them to select, create, and transform their environmental circumstances, they become producers of their environments (Bandura, 2000) which, in turn, enhance the potential to increase efficiency and productivity within their organizations.

Second, findings showed that the topic of intercultural conflict is very sensitive. I have tried to argue that structures in place within the organization might be the enabling factors here. The bounded space workers find themselves in reinforces the need for them to be interdependent, build trust, and follow rules to protect group dynamics. For example, what to disclose and not disclose and who to disclose information to all play important roles in keeping the labeling of a situation as an intercultural conflict a “taboo.” Participant awareness of the need to work in a collegial manner was very high and could possibly lead to them being extremely sensitive to matters involving intercultural conflicts.

In spite of the sensitive nature of intercultural conflicts, my findings showed that conflicts that occurred were not intercultural in nature or, perhaps more accurately, were
not considered to be intercultural in nature. I would argue that this was probably because a third culture had evolved that was not focused on the nationality of a colleague but on the objectives of the organizations in which they found themselves. With that unity of purpose, they developed a culture of accepting others differences. Focusing on enabling a strong organization will go a long way to positively facilitate the management of multicultural organizations, helping those organizations to realize the full potential of their workforce.

Third, both communication scholars and practitioners have to move away from what I describe as the “Hofstedian” paradigm. My findings, supported by other literature, strongly suggest that the use of the cultural value dimensions based on national culture have been overstretched. I quoted Hofstede’s own statement that acknowledged the extensive use of his theory and its disadvantages. He posited that “some carry the concepts further than I consider wise. At times, my supporters worry me more than my critics” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 73).

Critics from different disciplines, including social cognitive theory, have commented on some of the negative aspects of the cultural value dimension studies but to no avail. Modern textbooks in management and intercultural studies still hold this twentieth century theory as “gospel.” From my findings, participants’ perceptions of the role of organizational and personal culture in guiding how workers in multicultural organizations handle their conflicts supersede their perceived role of national culture. It is, therefore, expedient for scholars and practitioners to look beyond national culture and
consider both organizational and personal cultures as necessary constructs in their study of multicultural organizations and organizational behavior in general.

Rapid globalization and modernization have brought about several changes that need to be considered whenever we apply cultural value systems to studies. McSweeney (2002), in his criticism of Hofstede’s (1980) theory, mentioned that the IBM data were obsolete. My concern is not about the outdated data but the fact that globalization has made the world a multicultural place. Ninety percent of the participants in this research described themselves as multicultural based on their lived experiences.

About ten years ago, while working in a pharmaceutical industry in Ghana, I could not address my supervisors by their first names. That situation has now changed. Most multicultural organizations, which are oftentimes international, have managed to change some local cultural practices. The ability to transform cultures has been a contention with Hofstede’s theory. In his contribution to the influence of organizational cultures on national cultures of workers, Hofstede acknowledged that, “there have been examples of multinationals successfully reforming local cultural traits,” but he cautioned that “this is a difficult task” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 442). In essence, the effects of globalization are real and have changed how people identify themselves. Culture is constantly in flux (LeBaron, 2003). Therefore, formulating and/or privileging a comprehensive description about any group of people should be re-examined.

Most importantly, the constitutive role of communication, in my opinion, must be espoused by all communication scholars, especially intercultural communication scholars. In both of the organizations I studied, participants had developed ways of
relating the many cultures of which they were a part. In so doing, they had created a
composite set of values, norms, and social structures for themselves (through
communication) that contained components of all of the cultures to which they related.
Jordan (2002) put it succinctly when she posited that, through communication, sojourners
create a third culture which is a part of, yet apart from the other cultures. Consequently,
the first order phenomenon, as proposed by Craig (1999), should be our (scholars and
practitioners) guiding principle. The first order phenomenon posits that “communication
itself is the primary, constitutive social process” (Craig, 1999, p. 126). In my opinion, it
is imperative to acknowledge the ability of communication to create social order. This
acknowledgement can engender a better understanding of multiculturalism and its effects
in organizations.

Some findings in this study did not support the individualism-collectivism
(Hofstede, 1991) and high-low context (Hall & Hall, 1990) constructs. Participants from
collectivist cultures (site A) did not portray behaviors predicted by these two constructs.
For instance, Bruck (Israeli professor) openly indicated that he hated conflicts and
avoided them, even though Israelis are stereotypically known to be confrontational.
Jones (English professor) also indicated his dislike for conflict and always avoided it
based, he claimed, on childhood experiences. Kastner (German professor) attributed his
avoidance of conflict to his personal identity as a Christian. Sophia (site B) was more
direct and confrontational and only held herself in check because of her organization’s
culture. Participants therefore did not subscribe to the prescribed roles given them by the
aforementioned constructs.
Consistent with previous research, face is important in all cultures. However, based on my findings, some participants from collectivist societies who were supposed to be indirect were found to be more direct than other participants from individualist societies and vice versa. As a result, this construct was not necessarily supported by my findings.

Regarding power distance, Hofstede (2001) indicated that disparities between supervisors and subordinates were more acceptable in societies with large power distance than societies with low power distance. All participants from site A who were not only from collectivistic societies but also in a collectivistic country were on first name basis with other members of the organization. In fact, Sophia got into trouble addressing a colleague in Nigeria by her last name and had to apologize. Participants attributed this development to the influence of organizational culture. In this case, organizational culture overshadowed the approach/trait prescribed by membership in a high power distance culture.

Some participants were not only conscious of their subjectivity but, in the context of their prescribed roles, also acted as agents of change. For example, Bruck and Jones (site B) and William (site A) clearly indicated their awareness of how they were expected to behave because of their nationality but acted differently because they were their own selves.

Limitations of the Study

This research, like all other studies of its sort, has its limitations. First among those limitations was the difficulty in identifying willing partners in multicultural
organizations. This experience was a nightmarish journey for me. It took me almost a year to find multicultural organizations that were willing to participate. This was after I had (with the help of faculty members and friends) asked more than twenty-five multilateral and multinational organizations in different countries. Some of those countries included the US, Switzerland, Denmark, and Tunisia. Most of the organizations were, however, based in the US. Moving away from the status quo, where most researchers use students as their unit of analysis, was more difficult than I had anticipated and was a herculean task indeed.

Second, intercultural conflict studies have been marginalized because of their sensitive nature. As far back as 1977, Triandis noted how the dominancy of communication difficulties in multicultural organizations had oftentimes been downplayed. Findings from this study showed workers’ skepticism in discussing intercultural conflicts. In fact, most of the rejection notices I received from the organizations I contacted were based on the sensitivity of the issue. In a multilateral organization in Tunisia, the human resources director stated: “this is a sensitive issue and we are going through some tough times here. I am sorry I cannot be of assistance.” This and many other organizations had similar concerns. In one of the non-profit organizations in the US, I even had to contact the Vice President for Legal Affairs for clearance, yet to no avail.

What is needed is education to enable organizations understand the benefits of such research. What was revealing was that most of the “gatekeepers” in these organizations conceded the problem existed. I believe that, through education and a
better understanding, the issue will no longer be marginalized. It is expedient to note that some major multilateral and multinational organizations have taken the lead in this direction as far back as the beginning of the twenty-first century. A good example is the World Bank’s Cross Cultural Training (CCT) program which was first launched in 2003. The course (*Developing Multicultural Perspectives*) aims to raise cultural awareness of the Bank’s staff in their interactions with clients and colleagues. It is also intended to increase staff capacity to communicate, interact, and manage across cultures. The CCT has three modes of delivery. First, on-demand workshops are offered to teams or openly enrolled participants. Second, a module on cultural learning is offered as part of the Bank’s training on *Leading Strategic Change* (LSC); and third, an online self-learning program with assistance is provided by course leaders (Tobin, 2007). Such intensive programs should be encouraged across most organizations to enhance workers’ appreciation of the problem. Hopefully a better understanding will be a step in the right direction.

Third, even though the three cultures (national, organizational, and personal) have been studied extensively, not much has been done putting them together. Finding relevant literature was therefore relatively difficult. In addition, the sensitivity of the subject also possibly contributed to this situation.

Fourth, I encountered some difficulties transcribing some of the responses because of the accent of some participants. As a result, the voice of the Chinese professor (site B) was silenced.
Lastly, another hurdle was finding workers who were willing to be participants. I had to work around the schedules of willing participants and relied on snowballing till I ran out of participants. The story was not different from site A to site B. Here, even though I worked around faculty members’ schedules, I encountered many cancellations, either because they had forgotten about the schedule, or had other unknown but more important commitments.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Future research should concentrate on multilateral organizations where there is a greater concentration of members from various countries. Even though the organizations chosen were multicultural, a multilateral organization might present different challenges. Also, the possibility of finding more than one participant from the same country could help better determine the effectiveness of the three cultures model.

As an exploratory study, it would be interesting to duplicate this study in other multicultural organizations with similar foci (e.g., manufacturing, non-profit) to minimize, if any, the influence of the type of organization on findings.

Also, a mixed method approach to this study would go a long way in helping us better understand the influence of the three cultures. A quantitative approach could examine how the three cultures (organizational, national, personal) predicted conflict within multicultural and/or multilateral organizations. The three cultures will be the predictors with conflict as the dependent variable.
Chapter Summary

According to Bandura (1986), how people function is a product of a reciprocal interplay of intrapersonal, behavioral, and environmental determinants. This statement aptly represents the three cultures model. This is because most studies of multicultural communication have used similar lenses, such as individualism/collectivism, culturally homogeneous versus heterogeneous groups, high versus low context (Hofstede, 1991; Kaushal, & Kwantes, 2006; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Triandis, 1989). The aforementioned studies use bifurcations and generalizations to prescribe people’s behaviors. According to Bandura (2000), these conceptualizations of group functioning are replete with contentious dualisms that social cognitive theory rejects (self-centered agency vs. communality; individualism vs. collectivism).

In this chapter, I have discussed and synthesized the major findings of the study. I have, among other things, discussed the influence of the three cultures on organizational members’ conflict behavior and have, through my discussions, justified the need for a more holistic approach. I also advocated for a paradigm shift that considers organizational culture and personal culture as equal constructs to national culture. I discussed how participants perceived themselves and the exigencies of human agency. I subsequently touched on the implications of the study and theoretical implications as well; highlighting the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

This research as a whole projects the constitutive nature of communication. Without acknowledging that value, third cultures cannot be formed; organizational cultures would be controlled by management, and human agency would be lost.
Communication is the very essence of culture, without which people’s ability to work with others from different cultures would be non-existent.

My final thought: Equating self-efficacy with individualism versus collectivism at a cultural level is inappropriate (Bandura, 2000). Like Johns (2006), I posit that the contextual imperative of the proponents of the cultural value dimensions theory (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 1991; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Triandis, 1989) contradicts the constitutive values that communication presents. Any inability to shift the paradigm would perpetuate the prescribed stereotypes which, in my opinion, have become an anathema to the concept of freewill.
References


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Smit, I. (2001). Assessment of cultures: A way to problem solving or a way to problematic solutions? In C. L. Cooper, S. Cartwright & P. C. Earley (Eds.), *The international handbook of organizational culture and climate* (pp. 165-183), Chichester, New York: Wiley.


Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Organizational culture

- What is your position in this organization? How long have you been in this organization? Have you had any prior working experience in an international organization? If so, how long?

- What is valued with respect to how workers interact with each other within your organization? Are there any particular qualities that this organization tries to promote? Can you give me some examples?

- Can you give me a few examples of how this organization motivates you to put out your best?

- How will you define conflict? In your opinion, is conflict good or bad? Why do you think so?

- Describe, if any, some communication difficulties you encounter with colleagues from other countries?

- What role in your opinion does organizational culture play in how you manage your conflicts? Do you think this organization’s culture helps you manage conflicts with your colleagues/subordinates?

- It is obvious that in most organizations such as this, workers will have individual goals which might be incompatible among other individuals or groups of individuals. Tell me about how you resolve such differences?

- How do you reconcile the cultural differences among your colleagues with building relationships among the same group?
a. Does the diversity of the group make any difference to the way projects are approached? In the affirmative, please explain.

National culture

- What role in your opinion does national culture play in how you manage your conflicts within this organization?
- In your opinion, do your supervisors/colleagues/subordinates treat you differently because of your nationality? If no, how has that improved your workplace environment? If yes, how has it gotten in the way?
- The nationality of a co-worker, subordinate or supervisor might influence how you perform your job? Can you tell me about a time when (same/different) nationality helped you meet your job goals? When it got in the way?
- Can you recall a conflict you have experienced? How did your cultural background affect how you handled that conflict?
- What types of intercultural conflicts occur in this organization? What groups or cultures have frequent conflicts? How do these groups manage and address the conflicts?

Personal Culture

- What role in your opinion does your personal culture play in how you manage your conflicts
- Efficiency and productivity are essential in every organization. How will you describe these essentials in this organization?
- Can you tell me what team work means to you? Do you prefer working as a team or as an individual? Can you explain your preference? Do you have any concerns about being called by your first name? In the affirmative, what are some of those concerns?

- Can you please comment on your relationship with other colleagues regarding your own accomplishments in this organization? Do you mind being commended before your peers? Can you talk to me about some of those experiences?

- How comfortable are you speaking up during a group discussion or a meeting?
  
  → Probe: What is most important to you

- How comfortable are you in being direct and forthright when dealing with others
  
  a. Colleagues  
  b. superiors  
  c. subordinates

- Tell me about an occasion where you wrestled with what was appropriate and desirable behavior among your work mates?

- What makes you feel like you have obtained a sense of personal accomplishment at work? Please explain and give me some examples.

- Would you describe yourself as bi-cultural or multicultural? How has your background/culture shaped your personal culture?
Appendix B: Consent Forms

Title of Research: A Three Cultures Model Approach to Understanding Organizational Communication: A Case Study of a Multi-Cultural Organization

Principal Investigator: Herbert Blankson
Department: Communication Studies

Federal and university regulations require signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statements below, please indicate your consent by signing this form.

Explanation of Study
The study is intended to examine your perception of whether national, organizational and personal cultures influence how workers within a multicultural organization manage their conflicts. The study will involve a qualitative interview and will seek out volunteers from the workforce. Copies of the consent forms will be provided to the interviewees prior to the interview session by the researcher. Upon their approval and completion of the form, I will proceed to interview them. In order not to lose valuable information, I intend using a tape recorder. The recorder will only be used after receiving the consent of the interviewees. Please see the attached (as Appendix C) schedule for example questions for this type of data collection. All interviews will be transcribed, and the transcripts will be used as data in the study. Participants will not be identifiable on the transcripts.

Risks and Discomforts
This study will not pose any risk or discomfort to participants. Potential participants will be assured that involvement in the study is strictly voluntary and that they may decline participation at any point.

Benefits
The benefit will be a better understanding of how the Three Cultures model (National, organizational and personal cultures) influence how workers within a Multinational organization manage their conflicts. It will also give a better understanding of workers’ perceptions of conflict within the organization through their feedback rather than what is assumed. It would help this institution better understand the importance of organizational culture and its influence on conflict.

There would be no direct benefits

Alternative Treatments (if applicable)
n/a
Confidentiality and Records
Participants can be assured that the investigator will carefully and completely protect their contributions to this study. The qualitative interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed; however, the tapes will be strictly kept in a secure and locked location. With the transcripts, I will remove all possible identifiers from individuals. All records will only be accessed by the primary investigator and they will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Compensation
The participants will not receive any form of compensation.

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Herbert Blankson by phone 740 590 3791 or by e-mail blanksoh@ohio.edu
You may also contact the advisor Dr. Claudia Hale by phone (740-593-9160) or e-mail hale@ohio.edu

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I certify that I have been given a copy of this consent form to take with me.

Signature _________________________________ Date ____________
Printed Name ______________________________

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Appendix C: IRB Approval

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2. research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior

Project Title: A Three Cultures Model Approach to understanding organizational communication: A case study of a multi-cultural organization

Primary Investigator: Herbert Blankson

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Claudia Hale

Department: Communications Studies

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Date 4/22/10

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Appendix D: IRB Approval Amendment

The amendment, detailed below, and submitted for the following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University.

Project: A Three Cultures Model Approach to Understanding Organizational Communication: A Case Study of Multi-Cultural Organizations

Amendment: Title Change

Primary Investigator: Herbert Blankson

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Claudia Hale

Department: Communications Studies

Rebecca G. Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Date: 04/12/11
Appendix E: Approval from Office of Diversity

May 3, 2010

Ohio University
Office of Research Compliance
RTEC 117
Athens, OH 45701

To Whom It May Concern:

I was recently made aware of Herbert Blankson’s proposed dissertation on cultural differences among workers within multicultural organizations. As Vice Provost for Diversity, Access and Equity at Ohio University, I am very interested in how diversity manifests itself in various environments. As we work to promote diversity on campus and to develop a deeper appreciation of multicultural learning environments, it behooves us to be as knowledgeable as possible about the expression of cultural differences. Therefore, I write this letter of support on behalf of his dissertation study.

The Office for Diversity, Access and Equity will launch a summer institute for diversity education in July 2010 and the findings from studies such as Herbert’s will inform institute planners on interpersonal and intercultural dynamics during the institute. It will also educate institute instructors on applicable diversity theory. As Ohio University becomes more diverse from an international perspective this study will also inform student affairs and diversity practitioners on campus about how to manage and maximize the cultural differences within our midst. Research like this helps us become more effective at what we do.

Herbert Blankson’s study will add substantially to our knowledge on campus and within the larger higher education community. I wholeheartedly support his research. Please feel free to call on me if you have any questions about this correspondence.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Brian K. Bridges
Vice Provost