

Traditional Value System and Leadership Effectiveness in Nigerian Organizations

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Abstract

The application of social psychological theories of leadership in Nigerian organizations without validation of their cultural background and traditional value system has been called to question. An extensive appraisal of the major factors of value orientation across cultures and social systems in the globe indicates the limitations of the untested universal assumptions of leadership effectiveness in developing such theories on social norms, values, identities, self-concept and individualism-collectivism. The challenges are multiple-including membership status in organizations, leadership positions in organizations, tenureship and belief systems, and are occurring across cultures in Africa and within a sub-culture when addressing majority-minority matters. A social identity and leader prototypicality model proposed by Hogg and Van Knippenberg (2003) has been recommended for Nigerian organizations. This is hope, will provide a context for the citizens of Nigeria to believe in themselves and their abilities to solve their country's organizations' leadership problems.

Key Words: Values, Effectiveness, Leadership, Culture, and Theories

Introduction

In order to survive and for human beings to be effective, sociologists and anthropologists believe that humans must learn the skills, acquire knowledge and adopt to ways of behaving in the society into which they are born i.e. they must learn a culture. In Kluckhohn (1951)'s elegant phrase, culture is a 'design for living' held by members of a particular society. And since humans are social beings, their behaviours are also based on guidelines that are learned. Linton (1945) asserted that every culture contains a large number of guidelines that direct conduct in particular situations. Such guidelines are called 'norms'. For example, in all societies, there are norms governing, dressing, gender, age, marriage, work behaviour and interpersonal relationship.

Values (unlike norms) according to Storey (1997) provides more general guidelines. According to him, values are beliefs that something is good and desirable by people. By this, it is possible to conclude that values define what is important, worthwhile, and worth striving for. Like norms, values also are said to vary from society to society.

Essentially, norms can be seen as reflections of values. A variety of norms can be seen as expressions of a single value. Generally, sociologists maintain that shared norms and values are essential for the operation of human society. Without shared norms and values, members of society would be unable to cooperate and comprehend the behaviour of others or work together. With differing or conflicting values, they would often be pulling in different directions and pursuing incompatible goals. Disorder and disruption might result. In addition, an ordered and stable society requires shared norms and values. It is a known fact that human groups vary in sizes, composition, longevity and purpose. They also vary in cohesiveness, have different norms and are internally structured into roles in different ways.

However, almost all groups (Allport, 1920; and Vernon, 1931), even those that are apparently most egalitarian, have some form of unequal distribution of power and influence whereby some people lead and others follow. Although, such leadership can take a variety of forms (e.g. democratic, autocratic, informal, formal, intrusive, modest), it is a fundamental aspect of almost all social groups.

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995) "people can assemble as a group for different reasons and to perform different tasks. One of the most common reasons is to make decisions, through some form of group discussion". In fact, many of the most important decisions that affect people's lives are made by groups, often groups of which they are not members. Indeed, one could argue that most decisions that people make are actually group decisions – not only do they frequently make decisions as a group, but even those decisions that people seem to make on their own are made in reference to what groups of people may think or do (Baron and Kerr, 2003).

In the many groups to which people may belong (teams, committees, organizations, friendship groups or gangs), they encounter leaders (Dalil, 1988). Thus, people who seem to have the 'good' ideas that everyone else tends to agree with, people whom everyone seems to follow, people who seem to have the power to make things happen are called leaders. Leaders enable groups to function as productive and coordinated wholes.

To understand how leaders lead, what factors influence who is likely to be a leader in a particular context and what are the social consequences of leadership may be, social psychology has embraced a range of theoretical emphases and perspectives i.e. autocratic, laissez-faire and democratic. However, the application of these theories in African organizational cultures and Nigeria organizations in particular seem to neglect the importance of their cultural and traditional value system i.e. membership status in organizations, seniority, motivation, commitment, leadership positions, tenureship and belief systems. These theories and perspectives are heavily inbuilt with alternate-western traditional value systems. What we see in Nigerian organizations is disorder and disruption in the leadership patterns. Therefore, the application of these theories is call to question.

All of the factors as; lack of motivation of leadership in organizations, lack of commitment of leadership in organizations, corruption, ethnocentrism, the politics of exclusion, discrimination, economic mismanagement, weak social institutions, weak bureaucracy, lack of patriotism, mediocrity, e.t.c. may be the consequences of the application of the social psychological theories of 'effective' leadership (developed in the western tradition) in Nigerian organizations without their traditional value system and culture been recognized. As scientists, according to Gire (2005), "we must resist the urge to jump into a situation without first determining the status quo".

He continued, “it may seem obvious to us what we think the attitudes of Nigerians are toward a whole range of issues. However, we must also be mindful and cautious of the phenomena such as the false consensus effect and biased sampling”. In an extensive review of value research literature in Nigeria (Ojiji, 1998) revealed a considerable gap and inconsistencies in methodological considerations among scholars. According to him, the Nigeria orientation to value research is out of tune with current global conceptualizations of value. He then, proposed a research agenda that will overcome the weaknesses of earlier approaches by fulfilling both social and theoretical relevance.

Moreover, Hogg and Vaughan (2005) lamented that, “since the end of the 1970s, social psychology has paid diminishing attention to leadership”. The 1985 third edition of the “Handbook of social psychology” dedicated a full chapter to leadership (Hollander, 1985), whereas the 1998 fourth edition had no chapters on leadership. Instead, there has been a corresponding frenzy of research on leadership in organizational psychology (e.g. Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2002). Leadership is a topic that transcends disciplinary boundaries and has obvious applied potential.

Very recently, there has been a revival of interest in leadership among social psychologists – there are two chapters on leadership in Hogg and Tindale’s (2001) “Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group processes (Chemers, 2001; Lord, Brown and Harvey, 2001). This lack of interest to research on leadership effectiveness often left grey marks on the applicability, acceptability and useful discussion of the Western traditional theories of leadership in others’ culture.

It should be noted however again that none of these social psychological theories and perspectives of effective leadership were tested or validated using African or Nigerian cultural variables of motivation to work, intelligence, conception of effectiveness, commitment and achievement. It may well be that the psychologists believe that things were everywhere the way they see at their current location. It may also be that the theorists may think most people believe the same thing. However, it is possible that things are vastly different in African cultures – especially the Nigerian traditional value systems. And these may have implications for effective leadership in organizations.

It is amazing that only the theorists and a small band of their African friends, see or believe that way. What distinguishes empirical research from arm chair theorizing is the ability to go out there, obtain and analyse data and make reasoned conclusions based on what the data tell us. As one old saying in psychology goes, “the rat never lies”, we could extend that to be “the data never lies”. Based on my observation and the discussions I have had with many people, it seems as though collectivism, group communality of achievement, is the single index for evaluating a person’s worth in Nigeria. No matter the significance of a person’s accomplishments, so long as these are not directly translated to group achievement, they appear to be undervalued.

The aim of this paper therefore is to discuss the Nigerians traditional value systems, which are prototypical in organizational behaviour and leadership, and to present a case for Nigeria. The paper is reviewed along factors of values orientation (individualism – collectivism values), relationship between value and human behaviour (leadership), and the Nigerian traditional value system.

It is divided into four major sections: the first review world major values orientations, the second review the relationship between value and human behaviour (leadership in organization) and the third section review the profile of Nigerian traditional value system, and lastly, the conclusion and suggestion. The rest of this paper will present each of the sections.

The critical global determinants of value orientation

In an authoritative review of world culturally patterned social system, Fiske, Kitayama, Markus and Nisbett (1998) grouped European American (loosely called western) and Eastern Asian (loosely called Eastern) into two major world factors of value orientations. These groupings, according to the authors, best reflect the spectrum of available research findings when dealing with cultural differences at the broadest level, but the authors also recognized that these groupings may be insufficiently textured to capture more subtle cultural differences between subgroups. A detailed description of the two regions earlier, by Markus and Kitayama (1991) revealed that people in western cultures have an independent self-concept and people in Eastern cultures have interdependent self-concepts.

The cultural level distinctions may be reflected in differences in the way in which the self is construed and how social relationships are understood. Hogg and Vaughan (2005) concluded that “both the self and the basis on which social relations are conducted are relatively independent in historically newer and market-oriented, person-centred societies. While they are interdependent in historically older and traditional, group-centered societies”.

Also Vignoles, Chrygsochoou and Breakwell (2000) concluded that despite cultural differences in self-conception, the need to have a distinctive and integrated sense of self may be universal; however, self-distinctiveness means something different in individualist and in collectivist cultures. In one it is the isolated and bounded self that gains meaning from separateness, whereas in the other, it is the relational self that gains meaning from its relations with others. Cross, Bacon and Morris (2000) suggest that the interdependent self is based on different relations in individualistic and collectivist cultures. In the former it is based on close interpersonal relationships, whereas in the latter it is based on a relationship with the group as a whole.

The study of values has a long history in the social sciences, with psychology adopting a different level of analysis to sociology. Psychology has tended to explore values at the level of the individual, whereas, sociology has adopted a societal perspective. Within both disciplines, however, values are broad constructs used by individuals and societies to orient people’s specific attitudes and behaviour in an integrated and meaningful manner (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus and Nisbett, 1998). We know that values are tied to groups, social categories and cultures and are thus socially constructed and socially maintained.

Not surprisingly, the study of values is central to the analysis of culture. Hofstede (1980) in a factor analysis of 117,000 managers of a large multinational company in forty different countries, isolated four dimensions on which these countries could be compared: power distance; uncertainty avoidance; Masculinity-femininity; and individualism – collectivism. A sample of the results were that:

1. Denmark is low on power distance (0.18), uncertainty avoidance (0.23) and Masculinity (0.16), but high on individualism (0.74) – Danes do not easily accept hierarchical relationships, they tolerate uncertain outcomes, are caring and egalitarian, but individualistic.
2. Japan is high on uncertainty avoidance (0.92) and masculinity (0.95) – Japanese seek clear-cut outcomes, want to reduce life's uncertainties, and want to achieve and gain material success.
3. Singapore is high on power distance (0.74) but low on individualism (0.20) – Singaporeans tend to accept hierarchical relationships and are collectivist.

An interesting observation about the Hofstede's 1980 analysis is that Eastern and Western countries do not always follow an East-West dichotomy. Of these dimensions, the most popular for the work that attract public attention was individualism – collectivism. It was the one deemed to capture the essence of the East-West dichotomy.

Research into the nature of values expressed through culture continues to flourish; i.e. Fiske (1992); Fiske and Haslam (1996); Haslam (1994)'s relationship model theory. Also Bond (1996) has suggested that there is a fundamental Chinese value not captured by western research: Confucian work dynamism. We wish to add too that, the Nigerian communal work values and leadership by seniority are never captured in such social research.

We also observed that social psychologists should pay heed to the limitations of methodological issues in universal value research including cultural representation, demographic representativeness and problems of measurement in developing their theories. The challenges are multiple, cutting across cultures and within sub-cultures in Africa when addressing majority – minority group relations.

Relationship between traditional value systems and leadership effectiveness in organizations

Explanations of leadership that focus on personality traits, situational demands, leadership behaviour or person-situation interaction by the western theories neglect an essential aspect of leadership in other cultures (Hollander, 1985). For example, in Nigeria, traditional value systems of leadership is a group process. Without followers (Bass, 1990), there can be no leader. It is the members of the group who confer the role of leader on an individual, and it is they who finally topple the leader. He put that there is a dynamic transaction between leaders and their followers.

More generally, leadership can be defined as a process of social influence through which an individual enlists and mobilizes the aid of others in the attainment of a collective goal (Chemers, 2001). In discussing culture and identity, Jenkins (1996) argues that identities contain elements of the individually unique and the collectively shared. He explained that while each individual has an identity which is personal to them, those identities are shaped through membership of social groups. The individual elements of identity emphasize differences, the collective elements similarities, but the two are closely related. Using the ideas of symbolic interactionists such as Mead (1934) and Blumer (1967), Jenkins argues that identity is formed in the process of socialization. Through this process, people learn to distinguish the socially significant similarities and differences between themselves and others. It can be understood that identities are not just concerned with people's own impressions of themselves, but also with their impressions of others, and others' impressions of them.

There is therefore a need to explain effective leadership as a group process. One basis of this process may be an interpersonal equity transaction suggested by Walster, Walster and Berscheid (1978).

The second is leader – member exchange theory described by Danserau, Graen and Haga (1975). That is, quality of relationships in which resources such as respect, trust and liking are exchanged between leader and followers. Other bases include the Tyler and Lind's (1992) group value model and leader categorization theory of Lord (1985).

Of all the alternative models of leadership that seem to resemble the communalism traditional value system in Nigeria and Africa is the social identity and leader prototypicality model proposed by Hogg (2001); Hogg and Knippenberg (2003); and Van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003). The authors explained that leader schemas generally do govern leader effectiveness, but when a social group becomes a salient and important basis for self-conception and identity, group proto-typicality becomes important, perhaps more important than leader schemas i.e. in salient groups, effective leadership depends to a much greater extent on how well someone embodies the ideal norms of the group. This idea has support from laboratory experiment by Hains, Hogg and Duck (1997).

Their findings have been replicated in a longitudinal field study of Outward Bound Groups (Fielding and Hogg, 1997), and in further correlation studies by Plato and Van Knippenberg (2001). Other studies show that in salient groups, in group leaders (i.e more prototypical leaders) are more effective than out groups leaders, (i.e less prototypical leaders) (Duck and Fielding, 1999; Van Vugt and de Cremer, 1999). Reicher and Hopkins (1996, 2004) are of the view that leadership in salient groups rests on proto-typicality, and prototypes gain their properties largely from intergroup comparisons. That, much leadership rhetoric is all about defining the in-group in contrast to specific out-groups or deviant in-group factions.

The reality of this conception is that leaders not only lead their groups in different ways they lead their groups against other groups (Rabbie and Bekkers, 1976).

For instance, the political and military leaders who are often cited in discussions of leadership are leaders in a truly intergroup context – they lead their political parties, their nations or their armies against other political parties, nations or armies.

It would be surprising if the nature of intergroup relations did not influence leadership by say, changing group goals or altering intergroup relations. Perhaps, this captures the familiar tactic where political leaders pursue an aggressive foreign policy (where they believe they can win) in order to combat unpopularity experienced at home. Examples include the America's President Bush(Snr) going to Gulf war of 1991 and also President Bush(Jnr)'s war against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq 2003, American current President Obama's war on World terrorism, the killing of Bin Laden in 2011, and other America's foreign policies, Nigeria's president IBB setting up ECOMOG to go for peace-keeping in Liberia, Sani Abacha's following it thereafter, and also extending it to Serra-Leone, Nigeria's successive President IBB, Sani Abacha, Olusegun Obasanjo's war in Bakassi, e.t.c.

This section has discussed the current debate on applicability of western leadership theories on other cultures. The relevance of group identity has been emphasized on the major factor in leadership effectiveness in organizations. The next section will present the profile of Nigeria traditional value system in relation to the subject of the discussion.

The nigerian culture and value system

It must be made clear from the outset that Nigeria is composed of more than 250 different ethnic groups and sub-ethnic groups. If one press for an answer, members of each ethnic group would accept having something 'in common' with other groups, and many other things 'not in common' (Aiekwe, 2009).

Attempting therefore, to discuss the “average Nigerian” or ‘Nigerian culture’ is a hazardous business. Some Nigerians may even argue that there is ‘no average Nigerian’ and there is ‘no Nigerian culture’. But the fact is that all Nigerians comprising all the different and numerous ethnic groups have had a long history (at least, since 1914) of being administered as one unit under the same political and economic system. It should not be out of place to assume therefore, that increased knowledge of each other, combined with the need for a sense of common identity; the cultures of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria are converging and integrating. The emerging value system is ‘ethnic group solidarity’. However, the perspective presented here is based on Nnoli (1980) observations and the author’s own experience rather than an exchange of literature and research findings.

All traditional cultures in Nigeria did not encourage individual autonomy in their membership. Membership was by birth. From time immemorial, the Nigerian cultures practiced a policy of ‘communalism’ or collectivism (Essien-Obot, 1991). By value system, all activities like tilling the land, building of living quarters, food security, leadership, e.t.c. were approached collectively. Even children belonged to the collective society. The strong and able members were required to help the less able members of the society. This practice continues even today, in varying degrees of intensity by several ethnic groups especially in the rural areas and township associations.

Leadership positions were held by seniority (Dondo & Ngumo, 1998). Seniority could emerge from age-grade, educational status, official rank (authority), and economic status. Children were inculcated with conformist ideals. They were taught how to obey and respect senior people, and that success of their future careers could only accrue from this type of respect.

The parents again due to seniority of age, consolidate and reinforce this type of conformist behaviour in the home. Religious beliefs were directed to their ancestors-stressing diligence, reliability, fidelity and responsibility in all matters including leadership. The cultures did not imbibe the value system of individualism and material wealth accumulation. Thus, all shrines inadvertently discouraged individual entrepreneurship.

Even today, Nigerians convert to Christianity or Islam are seem to be in conviction with the Biblical or Qur’anic verses that condemn the rich with assertions such as, “the love of money is the root of all evil, and “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven”. Those people who exhibited some entrepreneurial spirit were often rebuked in social places.

There are also ample historical facts of the struggle for nationhood of pre-colonial Nigeria and other countries of Africa which witnessed the rise of several large empires that had complex forms of home governments with particular form of leadership style following it. In the North, there was once the empire of Bornu with its long established history; there was also the Fulani(caliphate) empire which had existed for one hundred years before its conquest by the British; the Benin empire stretched at its greatest point from east of the Niger to present area of the West; the Yoruba empire of Oyo was once one of the most powerful of the states of the Guinea Coast; then there were the principalities of the Niger Delta, the more loosely organized (assemblage) Igbo peoples of the hinterland and the Dukedom, and small tribes of the Benue and Plateau, e.t.c. These empires were popular and effective by their leadership administration styles of their leaders then. There is emphatic need therefore to investigate and bring forward:

1. King Kosoko’s leadership activities that made him popular up to 1851 in Lagos.

2. William Dappa Pebble's leadership activities that made him popular up to 1849 in Bonny.
3. King Jaja's leadership activities that made him popular up to 1887 in Opobo.
4. Chief Nana's leadership activities that made him popular up to 1894 in Benin River area.
5. Oba of Benin's leadership activities that made m popular up to 1897 in Benin.
6. Emirates of Sokoto, Gwandu, Ilorin, and Nupe's leadership activities that made them popular up to 1899.
7. Why the British found it more convenient to introduce "the indirect rule" in the Northern Nigeria which kept the existing system of government and indigenous rulers?
8. Why the British had to destroy the Arochukwu Oracle between 1901-1902?

It seems the act of theorizing on leadership effectiveness by the colonialists as applied to many African communities with diverse cultures, value systems and historical backgrounds was a tactical design to forestall national cohesion among them. This lack of national commitment, as witnessed by many African countries and Nigeria according to Ugwuegbu (1995), stems from narrow in-group identification and sectional loyalty exhibited by members of the country's constituent communities and ethnic groups. It becomes difficult for the citizens of such a "geographical expression" to have a nationally acceptable convergent culture extracted from the constituent cultures.

This is because each group neurotically (Ogungbamila, 2005), ascribes superior value to its culture with reference to other national cultures. The results are segregation and sectionalism. Without national cohesion there is no national goal, and, if any efforts would not be concentrated toward its attainment.

In effect, Hall (2004) asserted that the Nigerians and Africans, after this devastating form of imperialism employed by the colonialists and neocolonialists to implant and stamp European superiority in their heads, unconsciously believe that the significant element of humanity who are capable of intelligence and/or civilization are the Europeans". This has affected the African leaders in two ways: their level of self-confidence and level of which they believe the followers can think creatively (Eze, 1995; Rodney, 1972). They therefore, lack the will to mobilize and harness the indigenous resources (social values) for productive enterprise and political growth. This has made the African political economy foreign-dependent, controlled, heavily importing and consuming, and ever steadily decline (Eze, 1995). The leaders seem to follow with a ritualistic compulsion a road map masterminded by the world super powers.

On the followers, the effects of psychologic imperialism are not less monumental. Africans and Nigerians seem to hold in high esteem, everything inherited from the colonialists (language, religion, custom, style of dressing, science and leadership styles). Consequently, the Europeans' way of life is regarded as the standard for judging what is acceptable or unacceptable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the citizens of Nigeria must believe in themselves and their abilities to solve their country's leadership problems. There is a need to look inward for nationally relevant solutions to the citizen's collective and individual plights. An American or a Briton, for example, can not love Nigeria more than his/her country. Therefore, all the grants and pieces of "experts advice" are tailored towards an exploitative and a subservient end. The Nigerian Psychologists also must rise to the challenge of ascertaining that work purported to represent psychological knowledge be given scrutiny before it can be applied to general society.

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