Avoidance Conflict Management Strategy and Academic Staff Commitment in Government Owned Universities in South-South, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between avoidance conflict management strategy and academic staff commitment in Government Owned Universities in South-South, Nigeria. The study adopted a cross sectional survey research design. The population of the study was two thousand, eight hundred and ninety-four (2,894) academic staff of the three universities in this region. A sample of size of 353 academic staff was determined using the Taro Yamane sample size formula. The reliability of the survey instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha Coefficient with all the items having values above 0.7. The hypotheses were tested using the Pearson Moment Correlation with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The study findings revealed that there is a weak and insignificant relationship between avoidance and affective commitment; a very weak and insignificant relationship between avoidance and continuance commitment; and a very weak and insignificant relationship between avoidance and normative commitment. Recommendations were made to government for avoidance strategy to be dropped, and a more effective strategy adopted in the university system.

Keywords: Avoidance, Commitment, Affective Commitment, Normative Commitment, Continuance Commitment

INTRODUCTION

The growth potentials of academia worldwide depend largely on the ability of tertiary institutions to have committed staff under their employ, in the right positions, and at the right time. Academic staff commitment to government owned universities is very important to the development of teaching, learning, research etc., and the advancement of change in the entire university system (Akpan, 2012; Dixit & Bhati, 2012).

Commitment poses strong and critical bond that cement the productivity of the employee and the organizations (Dixit & Bhati, 2012). Staffs that are committed can be beneficial to their institutions in a variety of ways. Justifiably, academic staffs that are highly committed to their universities will identify with the values and goals and exhibit strong desire to belong to their institution (Chew & Chan, 2008). They are also associated with the willingness to display organizational citizenship behavior, and constitute a secure and stable work force (Dixit & Bhati, 2012). It is Germane to state that commitment among the academic staff ensures more creativity, less likelihood to leave the employ of his/her institution, and are source of competitive advantage (Dixit & Bhati, 2012; Odozibodo, 2015).

Thoughtfully, a committed staff is perceived to be one who engages in their work regularly, stays with the organization amid all odds and turbulence, high productivity and with a low perception of turnover (Akpan, 2012; Kombo, Obonyo & Oloko, 2012). Responsively, some organizations have also reciprocated the act of this commitment from their staff by investing in policies and practices that save as catalysts to the commitment of their employees (Akpan, 2012). This is evident in the sustained productivity in some government owned universities, which no doubt can be attributed to the improvement in the human and social capital (knowledge, skills, competencies; confidence, shared values, and teamwork) (Tolentino, 2004) amongst the academic staff of government owned

universities. Suffice to say that, the significance of academic staff commitment cannot be contested as it often results to reduced absenteeism/turnover, and foster productivity.

On the other hand, conflict management is significant to the progress of the university system to enhance academic development and growth. The fundamentality of a harmonious and peaceful work environment is necessary to ensure the optimal commitment of the academic staff. According to Greg (2012) conflict in organizations is uncertainly unavoidable and at the same time potentially beneficial as a way of functioning and as part of adjusting to a peoples' habits, culture, and values. Industrial conflict or dispute may not be totally ruled out in the work environment but prompt management of conflict is very necessary to forestall any form of damage that such conflict might tend to through-up (Akume & Adbullahi, 2013). Issues arising from industrial conflict are usually that of a very sensitive, emotionally charged and full of complexities (Akume & Abdullahi, 2013).Managing conflict in workplace is more important as it forestalls potential violence, increases work time, instils ability to control one's behaviour in conflict situations, enhance interpersonal communication, and achievement of improved ability to respect individuals' opinions / differences (Nwosu & Makinde, 2014). While conflict may arise between the employer and employees, or between the employee and employee, the aptness and proper management of conflict between both parties will undermine the intensity or consequences which if not properly handled may result to industrial action (Gomathi, 2014).

It is of this necessity that management of organizations employ conflict management tools such as accommodation; avoidance; competition; compromise; and collaboration (Akinsanya & Johnson, 2016; Nwosu & Makinde, 2014); bargaining, and forcing (Ndulue & Ekechukwu, 2016) to maintain peaceful / harmonious working relationship for the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. Conversely, the absent of/ or poor conflict management has caused significant setback

for the progress and survival of the organization, as a consequence affected institutions do not function properly. This condition or consequence if not arrested, may further escalate to violence, destruction, and even extends to the larger society and eat deep into the fabric of the nation. Pivotal to this discussion, and of great value is the prevention of deterioration relating to industrial conflict, it is eminent that parties to the dispute are usually advised to exhibit mutual understanding, good faith, trust and confidence (Gomathi, 2014).

From the above discussion, indeed there is no contesting the fact that conflict management goes "hand in gloves" with staff (employee) commitment. This is evident in a plethora of empirical studies conducted on conflict management (Akume & Abdullahi; Odoziobodo, 2015), and academic staff productivity, its challenges and prospect; its effectiveness in the Nigeria's private and public universities, etc. Studies which relates to avoidance conflict management strategy and academic staff commitment to Government owned universities in the South-South, Nigeria are relatively scarce. This study is expected to fill this lacuna in the existing body of knowledge by examining the relationship between avoidance conflict management strategy and academic staff commitment of Government owned universities in the South-South, Nigeria. The study also provided answers to the research question:

i.   What is the relationship between avoidance conflict management strategy and affective commitment of academic staff in Government owned universities?

ii. What is the relationship between avoidance conflict management strategy and affective commitment of academic staff in Government owned universities?
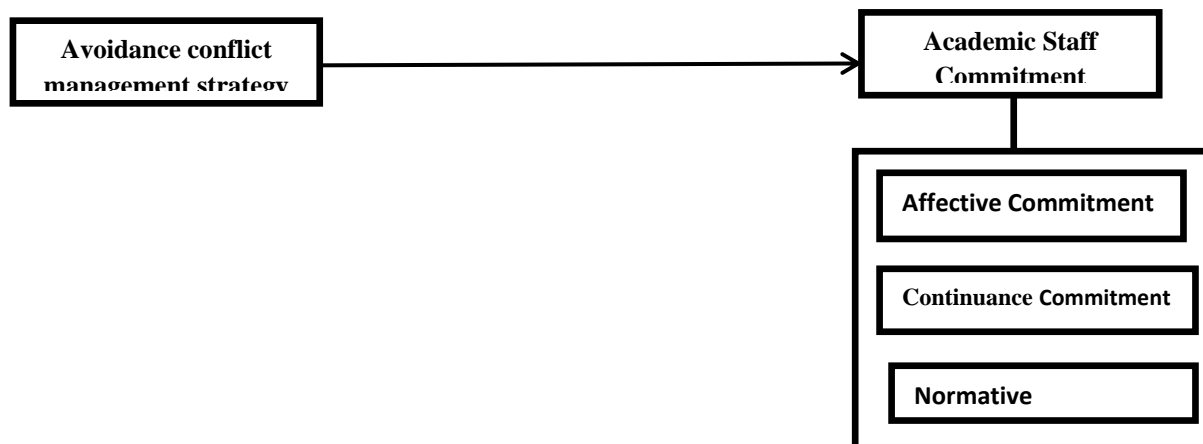
iii. What is the relationship between avoidance conflict management strategy and affective commitment of academic staff in Government owned universities?

Fig. 1.1 *Conceptual framework for the relationship between avoidance conflict strategy and academic staff commitment*

Source: Author's Desk Research, 2018

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

Follett Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is synonymous with the pluralist or the pluralistic frame of reference which is also credited to Follett (1940), and later to Alan Fox in 1966 (Riaz, Zulkifal & Jamal, 2012). Conflict theory views the organization as coalescence of sectional groups with different values, interests and objectives. Thus, employees have different values and aspirations from those of management, and these values and aspirations are always in conflict with those of management. Conflict theorists argue that conflict is inevitable, rational, functional and normal situation in organizations, which is resolved through compromise and agreement or collective bargaining.

Conflict theorists view trade unions as legitimate challenges to managerial rule or prerogatives and emphasize competition and collaboration. This view recognizes trade unions as legitimate representative organizations which enable groups of employees to influence management decisions

(Rose, 2008). Rose further states that the pluralist perspective would seem to be much more relevant than the unitary perspective in the analysis of industrial relations in many large unionized organizations and congruent with developments in contemporary society. Follett (1940) suggested five ways of dealing with conflict which are compromise, integration, domination, suppression and avoidance. According to her, domination means one party being victorious over the other party in conflict situations. While in compromise style, each of the party gives up some of his or her concern in order to be able to accommodate the concern of the other so as to reach a solution. But she argued that usually, people do not like the idea of giving up any of their concern. In integrating style, parties have the desires to reach a solution which would be beneficial and desirable to all of them. (Riaz *et al.,* 2012).

Avoidance Conflict Management Strategy

One of the first steps in conflict management is to recognize that a conflict situation exists in the board. (Boulding, 1962), states that the biggest problem in developing the institutions of conflict control in organization is to develop an action of plan to identify conflicts at its initial stage. Avoiding an issue is one way a boards' might attempt to resolve conflict. This type of conflict style does not help the board reach their goals. Avoidance is a strategy usually adopted by people with a poor history of dealing with conflict Cahn & Abigail (2007). Both sides in a conflict withdraw. It's referred to as the loss – loss outcome in managing conflict because neither side is able to deal with the issue talk less of managing it. (Wertheim, 2002) says avoidance is a destructive conflict strategy and that using it means conflicts never get resolved. However, this works well when the issue is trivial or when the manager has no chance of winning. However, where issues are trivial or there is a need to defer engagement to facilitate the compilation of

information before action is taken or the issues involve hostile or emotional factors that require some delay to consider the facts in dispute, the avoidance strategy becomes useful.

In the avoidance strategy, the passage of time weakens the intensity of emotions and the position of all parties as the reasons for the conflict are collected and a more auspicious atmosphere for resolution is gained by this strategy. Further, avoidance is a low stress approach that ensures time can be diverted to more important or urgent issues. However, there are some demerits in the avoidance Strategy. It may weaken the position of the leadership and can be interpreted as leadership accepting a position. Further, when multiple parties are involved, withdrawing or avoidance may negatively affect the relationship with a party that expects an action.

Academic Staff Commitment

Commitment is the force that directs the adoption of adjustment of employee behaviour/mindset and settings same towards the attachment to the functioning and morals of his/her institution (Hunter, 1989). According to Scholl (1999) employee commitment is a stabilizing force which acts upon to maintain and usher the behavioural pattern of the employee in a requisite manner directed when expected conditions are into met or do not function. Mowday (2003) also defines this construct as the relative strength of an employee's identification/involvement with the organization. Zeb-Obipi and Agada (2018) explained that "a committed employee is perceived to be one who stays with the organization even in turbulent times, attends work regularly, protects company's assets, and expends his time and energy, willing to help achieve group goal. Roepk, Agarwal, & Ferratt, (2004) portray employee commitment as representing a more global attitude towards the organization as a whole and characterized by the specific task environment where specific duties are carried out. But a more accepted and precise definition of employee commitment was made by Alen

and Meyer (1996) when the duo defined it as a psychological state that binds a worker to the organization.

Academic staff commitment is defined as an individual's belief in an acceptance of the goals and values of the organization, and a strong desire to remain in an organization (Ping, 2011). Most times, the concept employee commitment is used to refer to a type of employee, i.e., an employee with high organizational commitment. Within this context, it's generally refers to observable patterns of behaviour. When those patterns of behaviour are exhibited by the employee it is attributed to" "Commitment", and is usually said that the employee is committed. The next is that of Organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB). This behaviour can be explained from a traditional motivational perspective. For instance, many employees might work hard to ensure that the organization's mission is realized, not because of any dedication to the organization itself, but because they have identified with that particular social mission (Agada & Zeb-Obipi, 2018). However, commitment exists when individual maintains high levels of next world behavior inspite of low expectancy, lowest mentality, and /or will valence (Pierce & Dunham 1987).

Measure of Academic Staff Commitment

Affective Commitment

Affective Commitment is employees' emotional attachment to an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Affective Commitment refers to the employees' positive/emotional involvement or attachment to the organization (Kanter, 1968). Thus the employee with a strong effective commitment remains with the organization because they choose to stay with the organization. This employee commits to the organization because he/she wants to do so. Strong affected committed employee finds it difficult to leave the organization because the organization has become a part of them. However, Affective Commitment is measured as an affective or emotional orientation to an

organization, so that affectively committed worker remains within the organization solely for his/her own sake aside the accruing instrumental benefits (Zeb-Obipi & Agada, 2018).

Continuance Commitment

Continuance commitment is the desire and willingness of an employee to retain his membership of the organization because of fear of the possibility of being unable to get another job (Zeb-Obipi & Agada, 2018). Continuance commitment is based on the employee's recognition of the cost associated with leaving his job or organization. This form of commitment has to do with the awareness of the cost of action associated with leaving the organization. Continuance commitment is the degree to which the employee develops a feeling of being locked to his organization because of certain factors in consideration to age; retirement; high cost of leaving the organization, age and tenure, etc. (Meyer & Allen, 1997). This is a state where an individual is bound to the organization to an extent that they can benefit from the accruals associated with staying in comparison to leaving.

Normative Commitment

According to Jaro, Jermier, Kochler and Sincich (2003), normative Commitment is the employees' moral commitment which is psychologically attached to an organization by the individual. Meyer and Allen (1997) argued that normative commitment is a feeling of an individuals' obligation to continue with his employee. They further posited that a normative commitment is the degree to which the employee is psychologically attached to his/her organization through internalization of values, mission and goals. In other words, normative commitment is the commitment base on an individual moral belief or obligation that it is the right and moral thing to do by remaining with the organization. This obligation may have been informed by the investment of the organization on the employee (i.e., employee training & development, etc.). This may prompt the employee to remain

in the organization in order to repay this gesture. Others might have built a network of friendship and social status in that organization. It may even be that the employee was given that particular job by his/her biological relation. In such situations, it is very obvious that the employee involved will be unwilling to leave the organization.

Relationship between Avoidance Conflict Management Strategy and Academic Staff Commitment

Since Government owned universities are managed under government polices (both at the state, and federal level) and run by university senate committee which comprises members of different bodies with diverse interest, relationship conflicts are bound to exist. Relationship conflicts between the government (as management) and members of these universities if not properly managed can affect commitment among the teaming academic staff. According to Cronin and Bezrukova (2006) poor management of issues concerning employees' wellbeing in organization is negatively related to emotional aggravation, which also affects commitment to work. This can further reduced member's ability to process information.

Arguably, conflict might escalate and lead to non-productive results, or conflict can be beneficially resolved leading to employee commitment. Management, which implies the organization and coordination of activities or situations in order to achieve defined goals, is a skill that is necessary for handling conflict at any given time. Unmanaged or poorly managed conflicts generate a breakdown in trust and lost productivity. In the institutions (especially the university system) where success often hinges on the cohesion of a collective whole, loss of trust, commitment, and productivity can signal lack of commitment due to poor conflict management (Dontigney, 2013). When an effective conflict management strategy is used in the university system, the academic staff exert less energy on the burdensome tasks and spend more energy on teaching and learning building

relationship and less apt to practice undesired behaviours that will negatively impact academics or commitment to work. According to Knippen, Yohan and Ghalla (2011) conflict management leads to more successful engagement in conflict with outcomes of relief, understanding, better communication, and greater productivity for both the individual and the team. Unresolved conflict can lead to aggression and lack of commitment to work. Incessant strike actions and academic disruptions affect staff productivity and commitment to work, especially in terms of the value of lost time as staff suspend performance of routines (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2011). It also reduces motivation and increases staff turnover (Brahm, 2007), causes brain drain, and invariably affects the basic objectives of the universities which include teaching, learning, research, and community development. All these can be attributed to improper management of issues leading to conflicts in government owned universities.

Leung (1996) proposed that harmony and avoiding conflict have two distinct motives in Chinese society. Disintegration avoidance is instrumental in nature in that the maintenance of harmony is a means to other ends. With this motive, people avoid conflict as a way to further their self-interest and avoid potential interpersonal problems Hwang (1996). However, harmony Can also refer to the desire to engage in behaviours that strengthen relationships, a motive called harmony enhancement Leung, (1996. 1997); Leung, Koch and Lu (2002). These arguments on contrasting motives for conflict avoidance also suggest that there may be quite different behaviours used to avoid conf1ict. In addition to the common understanding of avoidance as outward conforming and agreeing employees, though they do not directly discuss the issues with the person they disagree with may actively try to have their ideas and interests considered and implemented. They may try to get their ideas accepted by powerful third parties or in other ways work around

the person to further their own interests. These strategies as well as the relationship and motives may affect the outcomes of conflict avoidance.

Based on the foregoing, we hypothesized thus:

Ho$_1$:   There is no significant relationship between avoidance conflict management strategy and affective commitment of academic staff in government owned universities.

Ho$_2$:   There is no significant relationship between avoidance conflict management strategy and continuance commitment of academic staff in government owned universities.

Ho$_3$:   There is no significant relationship between avoidance conflict management strategy and normative commitment of academic staff in government owned universities.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross sectional survey research design. The population of the study was two thousand, eight hundred and ninety-four (2,894) academic staff of the three universities in this region. A sample of size of 353 academic staff was determined using the Taro Yamane sample size formula. The reliability of the survey instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha Coefficient with all the items having values above 0.7. The hypotheses were tested using the Pearson Moment Correlation with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences at a 95% confidence interval.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Tests of Hypothese

The tests cover hypotheses Ho$_1$ to Ho$_3$ which were bivariate and all stated in the null form. We have relied on the Spearman Rank (*rho*) statistic to undertake the analysis. The 0.05 significance

level is adopted as criterion for the probability of either accepting the null hypotheses at (p>0.05)

or rejecting the null hypotheses at (p<0.05).

Test of Hypotheses One

Ho$_1$: There is no significant relationship between avoidance and affective commitment of academic staff of government owned universities.

Table 1: Correlation between Avoidance & Affective Commitment

		AVOD6	AFFE6
	Pearson Correlation	1	.021**
AVOD6	Sig. (2-tailed)		.697
	N	333	333
	Pearson Correlation	.021**	1
AFFE6	Sig. (2-tailed)	.697	
	N	333	333

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

The above (table 1) indicates the Pearson correlation coefficient of the relationship between avoidance & affective commitment with r value of.021** which confirms what appears to be a weak positive correlation. With PV (0.697) >0.01, correlation is statistically "not significant". This means that it just occurred by chance because in the sample, a small (weak) positive correlation was observed (.021) but not enough evidence to say that this correlation exists in the population. Hence we accept the null hypothesis one (Ho$_1$). This means that avoidance has no significant relationship with affective commitment of academic staff of government owned universities.

Test of Hypothesis Two

Ho$_2$: There is no significant relationship between avoidance and continuance commitment of

academic staff of government owned universities.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis between Avoidance and Continuance Commitment

		AVOD6	CONC6
	Pearson Correlation	1	.087**
AVOD6	Sig. (2-tailed)		.115
	N	333	333
	Pearson Correlation	.087**	1
CONC6	Sig. (2-tailed)	.115	
	N	333	333

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

The Table (2) above indicates test result which displays the relationship between avoidance
and continuance commitment. The r value of .087** implies a very weak and positive
correlation. The PV (0.115) > 0.01 indicates that this correlation is statistically "not
significant". Going by the decision rule, with this PV output, the test has failed to reject the
null hypothesis (Ho$_2$). In other words, the null hypothesis two is accepted. Hence we
conclude that avoidance has no significant relationship with continuance commitment of
academic staff of government owned universities.

Test of Hypothesis Three

Ho$_3$: There is no significant relationship between avoidance and normative commitment of

academic staff to government owned universities.

Table 3: Correlation for Avoidance and Normative Commitment

		AVOD6	NORC6
AVOD6	Pearson Correlation	1	.185**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.021
	N	333	333
NORC6	Pearson Correlation	.185**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.021	
	N	333	333

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

A cursory look at table 3, of the Pearson's correlation coefficient of the relationship between avoidance and normative commitment with .185** shows a very weak and positive correlation. Also the presence of PV @ 0.021> 0.01 is indicative of an insignificant correlation. The observed r values (.185) is not enough evidence to say that this correlation exists in the population. Therefore, we accept the null hypotheses (Ho$_3$), and establish that there is no significant relationship between avoidance and normative commitment of academic staff to government owned universities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Regarding the foremost objective of our study which was to ascertain the relationship between avoidance and academic staff commitment, it disclosed a very weak and insignificant relationship between Avoidance dimension and the three measures of academic staff commitment (Affective; Continuance; and Normative). Cronin and Bezrukova (2006) in their study titled: "Sweet and sour conflict: information, aggravation, and their effects on Conflict Functionality" foundthat: poorly managed issues concerning employees' welfare in organization typical with avoidance is negatively related to emotional aggravation, which also affects commitment to work. This can further reduce staff ability to process information adequately. Applying avoidance strategy in managing industrial conflict might escalate causing skirmishes between the employees an employer leading to nonproductive results. Also an empirical study by Fatile and Adejuwon (2011) on "Conflict and Conflict Management in Tertiary Institution: The case of Nigerian universities" reveals that: Avoidance or poorly managed conflicts produces breakdown of mutual trust, breeds chaos and leads

to loss of productive man-hour. The duo further stated that in the university system where success often centers on the cohesion of a collective whole, avoidance can create mistrust between the employer and employee. Avoidance can trigger requisite lack of commitment to work/ unproductivity, especially in terms of the value of lost time as staff suspend performance of routines due to incessant strike actions and academic disruptions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that there is a no significant relationship between dimension of avoidance conflict management and academic staff commitment measures of affective; continuance; and normative commitment.

Based on this the recommends the use of avoidance strategy in conflict management by government is totally unaccepted and should be dropped as it often causes rancor due to it perceived application as a tool to outwit the academic staff.

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