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## SOCIAL IDENTITIES MATTER: DIVERSITY AND THE QUAGMIRE OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION IN WORKPLACES IN NIGERIA.

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The examination of identity issues bothering employees and hindering the full attainment of their productive potentials were the major focus of this work. Nigeria's informal social makeup comprises of persons of diversified ethnic and religious extractions variably distributed in a vast population size of persons with ample potentials and diversified strengths capable of usefully contributing to the fortunes of workplaces. However, this has not played out as expected. This work highlights the behavioral implications of social-identification in workplaces and intends to lend a voice to the discourse on social identification, stressful work experiences as well as workplace behavior management. It also raises questions on phenomenological interpretations in the minds of contemporary compatriots of Nigeria as a nation of people bound in freedom, peace and unity. The social-identity and the social stress theories were explored in an attempt to explicate the interpretations of the meanings persons make of their behaviors and those of their colleagues at work. The outcome of such ingrained analysis depicts the extent to which identities they assume matter in the situation being experienced. This paper suggests amongst others that firms should stress and institutionalize the primary focus of corporate success over primordial sentiments in workplaces for the betterment of individual, workplaces as well as for national development.*

**Keywords:** Development, diversity, ethnicity, equity, identity, religion, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern Nigeria Protectorate together with the colony and protectorate of Southern Nigeria as a unified British Administrative Colony may have signaled the effective take off of the Project Nigeria which is still very much on course and with very great potentials for higher developmental goals attainment. Nigeria's natural, human as well as other apparent and latent resources are enormous and could be more beneficial to her citizenry and for national development if harnessed and properly utilized. However, several features of sub optimization have been observed in the state of her national development over time and possible solutions proffered for the reasons adduced (Adams, 2019; Ugwuzor, 2019). Suffice it to say that concerted attempts are ongoing at articulating the mores, values, norms, codes of conduct, legislations as well as other efforts at putting the right developmental building blocks in place.

Nigeria has very talented and industrious persons many of whom are willing and able youths ready to be positively engaged in productive ventures. The amassed work behavioral outcomes of persons who are engaged in the various productive sectors of an economy culminate to its success or failure depending on the direction of the outcomes. It is the desire of this work that the direction of employee outcomes is highly positive. However, this could be possible only if employees are in their right frame of mind. Undoubtedly, the average employee working in the contemporary Nigerian work environment could be inundated with myriads of issues capable of destabilizing the mind frame and adversely affecting work behavior. However, if an employee is bothered by a basic unit of demography such as identity which he/she may not be able to do much about, the tendency of the work behavioral outcome to nose dive is high (Jaja & Ugwuzor, 2014). One's identity is who one is. Persons may have identity crises when they either lose track of who they are or do not feel happy with who they are. A major transformation in a person's personality and the way they do things may occur if they have an identity crisis. Nigeria is made of about 250 ethnic groups with several languages and dialects (The World Factbook, 2019). The beauty of such diversified strengths is that the uniqueness of each group compliments the other and when pooled together in a coherent manner will be for the mutual benefit of all. This may also imply that the population may comprise a vast array of potentially skilled persons of diverse creeds and skill sets which are variably distributed among the groups and are available to do meaningful work. However, this has not been the case as the various outputs of productive sectors have left much to be desired. It is apparently perceived that each ethnic group attempts to assert dominance over the other in the eyes of the other. This perceptual position seems to be permeating workplaces.

One of the contemporary workplace practices is to promote diversity in their employment profile by bringing in persons of various levels of diversity not only to be able to get various shades of opinions representing the various groups and interests but as a social responsive stance. However, misconceptions, misunderstanding, mistrust and misinterpretations, due to ethno-religious lines of thought, have over the years made Nigeria to miss growth and developmental opportunities. There is an apparent disconnect between the supposed national values, beliefs and orientation and actual behavioral display as exhibited by employees in workplaces. Ethnic and religious bigotry have destroyed shared corporate culture and interest of commitment to excellence which should be the driving force towards corporate success. This man-made, self-inflicted and self-destructive behaviors seem to throw the doctrines of unity in diversity to the winds in spite of all the cogent efforts through such lofty programmes of National orientation and re-orientation such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC)

Scheme, the Federal Unity Colleges and guided implementation of the Federal Character Principle which is intended to make every ethnic group eligible to be considered equally in the scheme of things in workplaces in Nigeria.

The multilingual, multi-religious, multicultural nature of Nigeria's informal social makeup makes it imperative for individuals to tend to identify themselves every now and then along these lines as these social groupings tend to define and determine perks accruable at any particular time. One definition of social identity refers to a person's sense of self, derived from perceived membership in social groups. When one feels that one belongs to a group, there is the tendency that one may very well derive at least a portion of sense of identity from that group (Charness & Chen, 2020). One's ability to identify oneself with the social categories with the most privileges and benefits at any point in time will tend to be most attractive and beneficial to the individual. Thus perpetrating the drawbacks of the in-group-out-group favoritism and undermining the meritorious use of one's skills and ability to contribute to society. Whether one chooses to identify with an ethnic and/ or religious group or not, persons will tend to categorize themselves and others along such social categorizations and treat them with their own preconceived biases.

The examination of social identity issues bothering employees as well as the workplace implications of their work behavioral manifestations necessitated this work. This work promises to contribute to the discourse on social identification, stressful work experiences and workplace behavior management in a diversity laden work setup with overtones for diversity and inclusion strategies for the betterment of individual, workplaces as well as for national development.

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Situational factors such as the name one bears, the friends one keeps, as well as social group, location or associates at any given time, seem to be a determining factor in the definition of oneself. In other words the individual or social nomenclature adopted, associated with or presented may be an object for persecution or concession. To this end, persons tend to be overly conscious of and concerned about ones identifier at any given time in order to garner as much privileges as possible. Mustapha and Ehrhardt (2018) posited that indigeneship translates economic competition into interfaith or political confrontation as well as intensifies the ethnic or religious nature of the struggle over ownership, control and resources The quagmire of ethno-religious identification in Nigerian workplaces seems to make mockery of the 'unity in diversity' being largely proclaimed. Social identification is the way oneself is defined in the context of the social situation one finds oneself. In workplaces in Nigeria, the inability of one to see oneself as the same irrespective of the environment is of great concern. Despite the professed unity in diversity, persons seem to lack trust in the system as they perceive inequity and lack of transparency which makes them overly worried about how they identify themselves. For example, when persons feel that career advancement is a function of specific in-group membership as well as other inherent autochthonous claims, the fear of sabotaging their career makes them tend to assume different identities at different times. This work relies on the social stress theory as well as the social identification theory to elucidate the innuendoes of social identification and the dynamics in an ethno-religious conscious work environment.

The Social Stress Theory highlights issues of social inequality and disparities. The theory postulates that persons with disadvantaged social status are more likely to be exposed to stressors and to be more vulnerable to stress because they have limited psychosocial coping

resources (Mossakowski, 2014). Depressive symptoms as well as other presentations of such dispositions tend to lead to a higher risk of mental health and well-being issues (Mossakowski, 2014; Ward, Feinstein, Vines, Robinson, Haan & Aiello, 2019). The Social Identity Theory sets the tone on how persons identify, categorize and compare themselves and the groups they belong to with other individuals and groups in social settings (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The theory provides the fundamentals in the understanding of the psychological foundation for intergroup prejudice. Ujoatuonu, Kanu, Ugwuibe and Mbah (2019) have opined that Nigeria is a heterogeneous and multi-ethnic state beset by numerous cleavages and centrifugal tendencies. The Country is characterized by ethnic, religious and cultural pluralism which has been part of the very fabric that defines people's identity. The Nigerian situation seems to be an abuse of social identification as this is often used as an instrument of exploitation, manipulation and ennoblement to obtain the most privileges to the detriment of the generality. Primordial sentiments have been indicted as being responsible for the dearth of national patriotism, values and respect for democratic cultures all of which affects nation building (Sokoh, 2019). The consequential effects of identity could be both positive and negative for firms. As a positive force, Mossakowski (2018) observed that a strong ethnic identity, which encompasses ethnic pride and knowledge, involvement in ethnic practices, and a cultural commitment or feeling of belonging to one's ethnic group, significantly benefits mental health. On the other hand, one's sense and commitment to a social group could be dangerously limiting. The issue of self-identity, in the negative sense which is the hallmark of identity politics, has been seen as a veritable tool which has unfortunately been used more and more as a wedge to separate subgroups (Charness & Chen, 2020). The Social Identity Theory provides a basis for gaining a more precise and ingrained comprehension of interpersonal interactions in cases of ethnic and religious mixes.

Ethnicity and religion are two key diversity dimensions which have bedeviled the progressiveness of the productive capacities of several workplaces in Nigeria. Osimen, Balogun and Adenegan (2013) have noted that ethnicity, tribalism, politics of prebendalism, elitism, greed, antagonism, civil strife, corruption and so on have motivated crises and underdevelopment in Nigeria. Osaghae (2020) on his part adduced that ethnicity is a problematic phenomenon whose character is conflictual rather than consensual. Osaghae (2020) further stressed that ethnicity is a conscious behavior based on ethnic identity or loyalty in a competitive situation involving more than one such identity, which is aimed at furthering interests of the individual and/or group. It has been noted that power and resource allocation are monopolized by a selected few in the pluralistic society at the expense of other groups (Onwumere, 2019). The reoccurring ethno-religious conflicts therefore, is inextricably tied to the problem of identity and the problem of citizenship which are rooted in the psychopolitical perception of Nigeria by an average Nigerian (Sokoh, 2019). Thus, making bickering and rivalry among the diversity dimensions of the component units a major challenge in the quest for unity among the diverse groups. This situation may not be too different in the case of religion where the primordial sentiments tend to be exploited by religious bigots through epithets of derogatory and pejorative allusions as well as other myopic and self-destructive tendencies that cause divisions and intolerance in order to gain access to power and control of resources. Ogunleye (2021) seem to insinuate that religious pluralism in Nigeria may be expressed in forms of oppression, domination, exploitation and manipulation.

## **BEHAVIORAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL-IDENTIFICATION IN WORKPLACES**

The more people are overly consciously reminded of who they are or the social grouping to identify with in workplaces, the more certain behaviors antithetical to growth, creativity and harmonious working relationships, become manifest. Some of the said behaviors will be highlighted in this section to lend a voice to the discourse diversity and inclusivity and amplify the behavioral implications of self-identification.

### **OPPRESSIVE TENDENCIES**

A measure of diversity Management is the extent to which employees are bothered about issues that differentiate them from others. In other words diversity will be said to have been adequately managed in workplaces if and when employees do not have concerns on what differentiates them from colleagues at work. In work scenarios where certain individuals or groups believe that the structure and mandate for the control of power and resources in the firm lie within them, there is the tendency to want to lord it over, and invariably, bully the other individuals or groups as the case may be. The place will be devoid of the basic elements of a progressive work climate. The oppressed party or parties feel threatened, intimidated and humiliated. Ojedokun, Oteri and Ogungbamila (2014) believe that the workplace is supposed to be a second home for employees and that certain social etiquette and norms for appropriate interpersonal relationship ought to be adhered to. When this is not the case, then workplace bullying occurs. Workplace bullying include hostile behavioral expressions in the workplace that tend to use physical, verbal, or psychological cues to cause intimidation fear, or distress to the victim (Namie & Namie,2011).

### **TURNOVER PROPENSITY**

Progressive firms ought to hiring and make conscious efforts to retain their best hands. Under-performing employees may also be spurred to higher performance by understudying high achievers. This is for the benefit of the firm. However, when the workplace does not have an atmosphere of friendliness and employees do not feel appreciated for their valued contributions especially because of their social identities, the employee turnover propensity is likely to increase. Pawirosumarto, Sarjana and Gunawan (2017) have observed that creating a safe ,equitable and welcoming work environment is challenging but when critically considered could result in positive employee performance and job satisfaction. Zambrana, Valdez, Pittman, Bartko, Weber and Parra-Medina (2021) put forward that workplace discrimination triggers stress levels as well as depressive symptoms and affect employee early morbidity and premature departures.

### **SECRECY**

Some desirable features of a good work environment are openness and transparently honest communication and interpersonal relationships. When firms' mission and goals are paramount in the minds of employees, they are challenged to make meaningful contributions towards such goals. However, when there are disaffections, rancor, misconceptions and misinterpretations between individuals and groups, persons may be unwilling to divulge useful information or suggestions that will make the 'enemy party' succeed to the detriment of the organization. Workplace rivalry has led to aggression and secrecy which has negatively impacted on employee performance in organizations (Igbadoo, Lawal, Shehu & Ikebuoso, 2021).

## **CONFLICTS**

Personal and social identity are fundamental and symbolic tools with which individuals can adapt to reality which has implications for personal and social adjustment and inclusiveness (Crocetti, Prati & Rubini, 2018). Selfhood and identity are affected by the groups to which people belong as well as the potential benefits for the individual (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002). Conflict of people interests who gets what power, position, supremacy struggles, with increased cases of factionalization and situations that demand answers to questions such as what benefits accrue to us? Who gets the lion share? What opportunities do I and my group members have in this deal? The coveted social fabric for unity could be abraded by divisive politics, interpersonal conflict, ethno-religious rancor, over consciousness of one's identity and so on.

## **DELIBERATE SABOTAGE**

An unhealthy workplace is characterized by the prevalence of bitterness, rancor and hostility. In such a scenario, employees perceive the lack of understanding, cooperation, respect, compassion, support, haphazard upward mobility standards, to mention a few. In An unhealthy workplace employees seem to have no sense of belonging, and find the work as physically and psychologically sapping. Depending on the work structure, employees who work on a nine to five or eight-to –four basis will spend at least one third of the day at the workplace. If the workplace atmosphere tends to lack cooperation and values of shared purpose as well as understanding of interpersonal relationship, especially when there is lack of trust in the intentions of coworkers, there is ample reason for fear and doubts (Wu, He, Imran & Fu, 2020). Employees could seem paranoid with inter group tensions and distrust with less thought and effort at doing productive work. These will not only affect the functionality of the employees and productivity for the firm but also enhance firm's chances of failure. Employees feel unhappy and detached from their jobs. They have no desire to take prosocial actions nor any voluntary helping behavior. The employees feel lack of commitment to excellence and may tend to deliberately sabotage the effort of a person in charge of an organizational activity just because the person is not in the desired social in-group. Sabotage is a deviant behavior commonly associated with injustice (Ambrose, Seabright & Schminke, 2002) The disgruntled person will vent his/her venom on any individual or organizational process in order to give him/herself a sense of justice. This can be evident in an employee's deliberate attempt at reducing pace, quality and /or quantity of work output, theft of firms resources including time. Ezeh, Etodike, and Nwanzu (2018) have described employee sabotage as a dimension of counterproductive work behavior in organizations by an employee which serves the best interest of the employee without the consideration of the norms of the organization or her goals.

## **VIOLENCE**

Violence could range from physical or verbal assaults, hate speeches, threats to life and other threatening tendencies. Not much will be achieved in a workplace where violence holds sway. Osaghae (2020) surmises that the need to belong is a basic human need and that the Nigerian state, as with other African countries, is trapped in a crisis of belonging and further asserts that Nigeria suffers from deep seated divisions which cause major political issues which are often vigorously and violently contested along the lines of intricate ethnic, religious and regional divisions. Slavich (2022) suggests that many of life's most impactful experiences that affect interpersonal cognition and behavior involve either social safety such as acceptance, affiliation, belonging, inclusion or social threat such as conflict, isolation, rejection, aggression, devaluation, discrimination and exclusion. It has been advanced that a single maladaptive encounter in the workplace is enough to adversely affect an employee's

stress level (Lazarus, 2020). This inability to cope with high levels of psychological distress could lead to the manifestation of violent behaviors (Hill, Mossakowski & Angel, 2007).

### **DELINQUENT WORKPLACE BEHAVIOR**

As big shortcomings of social identity, favoritism and discrimination have made employees to adopt certain behaviors and attached certain stereotypical positions towards others outside their categorical groupings. A Nigerian Pidgin English paradoxical aphorism that *Monkey dey work baboon dey chop* tend to control of the sensibilities of marginalized out-groups. The axiom implies that marginalized group members feel they work hardest and benefit the least. Disfavoured persons may perceive injustice and tend to behave in certain delinquent manners to the detriment of the firm. Such delinquencies could be expressed as forms of deviant behaviors. Deviant behaviors also known as disruptive behaviors are voluntary behaviors that violate significant organizational norms and in so doing threaten the well-being of an organization itself, its individual members, or both (Afzali, Nouri, Ebadi, Khademolhoseyni & Rejeh, 2017; Bennett, Marasi & Locklear, 2018). Many reasons have been attributable to cause deviant workplace behaviors. They include individual, organizational, environmental, and social factors such as personality characteristics, dissatisfaction, frustration, anger management issues, perceived injustice and so on (Afzali et al., 2017).

### **WAY FORWARD**

Nigerians are supposed to be Nigerians irrespective of where they come from in terms of lineage or origin. Their contributions to society should be reckoned by their skills or abilities. The apparent rivalry between and among the majority and minority ethnic groups, the struggle and tussle for power and resource control of the various dichotomous groups as well as other subtleties in the diversity mapping in the contending situations may have made the Nigerian ethnic and other in-group- out- group factionalization very convoluted. Each time the talk of the unity and indivisibility of Nigeria is highlighted and the need to select persons for momentous tasks, the divisions seem more pronounced which negates the core intension which is capacity utilization for National development. As a point of departure from the foregoing precarious and undesirable situations, organizations should have strong institutional frameworks with the right intensions.

The organizations should not be weary in the effort at intensifying employee thought processes towards believing that each person has a common stake and that all employees have a shared ownership of the success or failures of the organization thus eliminating negative stereotypes about social out-groups. By making the organizations success the general focus and interpersonal bonding institutionalized, primordial sentiments could be eliminated.

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