Problematizing National Dimensions: Community Members' Views of Conflict Management in Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies

Mary Jane Collier [a] , Ruth J. Parsons [b] , Linda Hadeed [c] & Karene-Anne Nathaniel [c]

[a] Department of Communication & Journalism, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

[b] Graduate School of Social Work, Conflict Resolution Institute, University of Denver, Denver, Colorado, USA

[c] Department of Behavioral Sciences, University of West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, West Indies

Available online: 22 Apr 2011

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MARY JANE COLLIER

Department of Communication & Journalism,
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

RUTH J. PARSONS

Graduate School of Social Work, Conflict Resolution Institute,
University of Denver, Denver, Colorado, USA

LINDA HADEED and KARENE-ANNE NATHANIEL

Department of Behavioral Sciences, University of West Indies,
St. Augustine, Trinidad, West Indies

The current exploratory study addresses cultural issues implicated in community members' views of conflict on the island of Trinidad in the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Respondents who were interviewed described family, organizational, and neighborhood disputes, and their views of conflict and preferences for conflict management differed across these types. The results suggest the utility of examining dialectic tensions rather than bipolar cultural dimensions and show the need for further development of contextually negotiated and culturally relevant models of conflict resolution in the West Indies.

KEYTERMS   conflict management, critical and interpretive perspective, dimensions of cultural variability, Trinidad, West Indies

Address correspondence to Dr. Mary Jane Collier, Department of Communication & Journalism, MSC03 2240, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001. E-mail: mjc@unm.edu

INTRODUCTION

While numerous scholars argue that culture affects and is affected by communication in contexts of conflict (Avruch, 1998; Huber, 1993; Kelman, 1996; LeBaron, 2003; Lederach, 1995), the specific ways that cultural issues emerge in community members' experiences of conflict in the Caribbean generally, and Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) more specifically, are not well understood. Conflict that is situated in this region merits research attention because the twin-island nation of T&T is home to groups with diverse ethnic and racial identifications; it has weathered multiple waves of colonization by the Spanish, French, and British; there are multiple religions practiced; and it has been a key economic port, especially during World War II when the United States located its Caribbean fleet there. Further, Carnival, introduced by French planters in the late 18th century and an original instrument of civil disobedience, has evolved to become an annual event that is internationally attended and which combines satire, performance, masquerade, and parading to steel pan music through the streets of Port of Spain. While natural gas has enabled the economy to grow, drug trafficking, crime, and domestic abuse have also increased. Therefore, the dynamic history and complexities of the social landscape do not lend themselves to previously theorized and traditionally applied "national" descriptors of conflict management. In sum, definitions of and approaches to managing conflict in nations with extensive colonial histories and complex cultural identities such as T&T warrant further theorizing and scholarly attention.

Cultural diversity is a central part of the contemporary scene in Trinidad. According to the U.S. State Department's November 2009 profile, the people of T&T are mainly of African or East Indian descent, with a smaller percentage of Europeans. While the majority of the population speaks English, small percentages also speak Hindi, French patois, and several other dialects. Trinidad has two major folk traditions: Creole and East Indian. Creole is described as a mixture of African elements with Spanish, French, and English colonial culture. Trinidad's East Indian culture came to the island beginning May 30, 1845, with the arrival of indentured laborers brought to fill a labor shortage created by the emancipation of the African slaves in 1838. Most remained on the island, and they still dominate the agricultural sector, but many have become prominent in business and the professions. East Indians have retained much of their own way of life, including Hindu and Muslim religious festivals and practices.

Many of the islands of the English-speaking Caribbean including Trinidad are classified as having "developing nation" status, and the University of West Indies is at the forefront of creating alternatives to dispute resolution throughout the Caribbean islands. For example, advanced degree programs in mediation have been created at the University of the West Indies,

St. Augustine, and credentialing programs for community mediators as well as community mediation centers have been developed. Conflict management and mediation scholarship in the Caribbean region is in need of valid and relevant community experiences in order to drive development of sufficiently complex models of conflict resolution. Therefore, given struggles contesting colonialism, a national anthem that says "every creed and race finds an equal place," and institutional attention to dispute resolution in the area, Trinidad is a rich site for scholars and practitioners to examine community members' views of conflict and conflict management.

This study, therefore, contributes to the broader literature of conflict and culture by addressing a country which has a rich, contested colonial history and a cultural space in which pride in national identity and racial/ethnic diversity is praised in public documents and celebrations. Investigating the role of culture in conflict on the island of Trinidad enables us to address not only national group identities, but also intersecting gender, class positioning, religious affiliation and other identity locations (Avruch, 1998; Huber, 1993; Kelman, 1972; LeBaron, 2003; Lederach, 1995) as well as cultural hybridity. Additionally, this study showcases locally generated experiences of conflict and descriptions of norms for conflict management that increases the validity and relevance of interpretations and potential application of findings. An additional benefit of this study is that it was undertaken as part of a joint 3-year project with an international research team combining insider and outsider perspectives; 2 scholar/practitioners reside in Trinidad and 2 scholar/practitioners reside in the United States.

More specifically, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate the value of identifying emergent dialectic tensions as a frame for understanding Trinidadian community members' descriptions and normative preferences for dealing with conflict. Since our ultimate objective is to develop more culturally complex and contextually responsive models of conflict management in T&T, we sought to understand community members' experiences of recalled conflicts, to identify dialectic tensions such as individualism and/or collectivism relevant to described conflicts, and finally, to discuss implications and applications of those tensions as they pertain to particular types of conflicts or implicated identities. Because of the need to begin with community members' experiences, we chose in-depth interviews as the means to generate the discursive texts to look for the dialectic tensions.

Consequently, this study is designed as an exploratory, preliminary investigation to examine dialectic tensions that emerge in interview discourse of community members, to inform the design of culturally sensitive, contextually continent, and relevant models of conflict management in T&T. The focus on dialectic tensions allows us to problematize and reframe dimensions of cultural variability (such as individualism or collectivism) that are often used as bi-polar, ontological characterizations of national groups. Our findings also

add to the intercultural communication literature on conflict in "developing," "post-colonial" nations, and provide foundational information for the design of third-party intervention models in T&T and beyond.

BACKGROUND

History, Demographics, and Economy of Trinidad and Tobago

The most southerly islands of the Eastern Caribbean, the twin-island Republic of T&T is situated just off the eastern coast of Venezuela. According to the U.S. State Department's November 2009 profile of T&T: 1.3 million people are made up of 40.0% East Indian, 37.5% African, 20.5% mixed, 0.6% European, 0.3% Chinese, and 1.1% other/not stated. Religion is an important social institution and the population is comprised of 36.0% Roman Catholic, 22.5% Hindu, 7.8% Anglican, 6.8% Pentecostal, 7.2% Baptist, 5.8% other Christian, 5.8% Muslim, 54.0% Seventh Day Adventist, 10.8% other, 1.4% unspecified, and 1.9% none.

Barrow (1998) noted that "the Caribbean countries share a heritage of colonialism, slavery, migration, plantation structures and global periphery status, all of which have combined to shape contemporary cultural patterns," while, "in countries such as T&T, St. Lucia and Dominica, controlled by the French or Spanish at some time during their colonial history, the addition of Catholicism, Creole language (Kweyol) and Carnival distinguishes them [from other Caribbean nations]" (p. xiii).

Understanding historical struggles is important to understanding contemporary conflict and norms of conflict management in Trinidad. For example, Williams (1944/1966) noted that the origin of conflict in the Commonwealth Caribbean started between colonizer and colony. This conflict resulted in the destruction of indigenous peoples and the eventual development of the highly stratified nature of plantation society based on race, class, and creed. Williams outlined the conflict between Africans and East Indians after the abolition of slavery as well as the conflict between former slave and plantation owner, and the consequent growth of the urban population in light of the African rejection of the agrarian lifestyle. Williams's accounts (1944/1964, 1940/1966) began to function as political manifesto as well as historical account. Educated at Oxford, Williams called for Trinidadians to proudly claim their past and determine their own political future. As Harney (1996) described, "Williams' rhetoric of nationalism became tied to both anti-colonialism (Williams' famous 'Massa day done' phrase) and to a subterranean one of African succession ... using the rhetoric of race and nationalism, Williams and his urban Afro-Trinidadians seized the young nation" (p. 57).

The nature of conflict in T&T is also a common theme of popular novels by Trinidadians. Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* (1953) includes conflicts between persons of African descent and those of East Indian descent, their respective

conflicts with the ruling White class, the stark differences between the more matriarchal African household and the more patriarchal East Indian household, and an almost casual acceptance of violence at the most basic level of society, that of the family unit. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* (1960) and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) focus on the conflict between races and religious beliefs as well as the conflict associated with competition for scarce resources such as education and employment. Both the unique and diverse nature of communication in T&T is also featured in that Naipaul uses *picong*, a rhetorical style intended to poke fun or belittle the person to whom it is directed. His descriptions also explore the highly communal or group-based nature of T&T society and portray how decisions are made collectively based on social mores defined by race and class. Such novels illustrate the complexity of negotiation of conflict issues as well as cultural identity positions.

With regard to the government and political system, the English-speaking nation of T&T was last colonized by the British and gained independence in 1962, severing links with the Monarchy in 1976 when it became a Republic. Its government of parliamentary democracy is based on the West Minister system, with the Privy Council in Britain still being used as the final arbiter in judicial matters. This is likely to change given the evolving implications of the 2005 establishment of the Caribbean Court of Justice in the capital, Port of Spain.

T&T is a rapidly developing nation, and, with the recent increase in oil and gas reserves, it is moving towards developed country status at an accelerated rate, but national culture is still contested and complex (Reddock, 1998). Trinidad is an island that has what Triandis, Brislin, and Hui (1988) described as antecedents to individualism throughout the world, affluence, financial independence from primary groups, industrialism and cultural complexity, and smaller more mobile families. However, while information technology and industrial and infrastructure developments reflect modernity, many social roles, rules, norms, and values continue to reflect traditional values; African symbolism, beliefs, and practices have survived to contribute to a reconstituted Creole culture (Barrow, 1998). Crime rates have increased, especially drug trafficking and domestic violence, and sex stereotyping and unemployment rates for women are consistently higher than for men (Barrow, 1998). The issues around third-party conflict resolution have become more pressing in recent years due to the creation of Mediation Centres, the passage of the Mediation Act No. 8 in 2004, and the establishment of the Family Court. In addition, the Family Court of Trinidad and Tobago opened in 2004 and has successfully improved access to justice for members of the public and increased judicial services and dispositional options. However, there is a dearth of academic research about the origins of conflict in T&T and methods of communication and conflict management in use by community members.

With regard to calls for further research, Lazarus-Black (2008) in her research about domestic violence law in Trinidad, argued that, "There is a

place reserved for violence in the ideologies and practices that constitute family, gender and work, and that these coalesce to form local cultures of reconciliation that act as filters, not only between, but also within, the community and the institutions of law and the state" (p. 40). These structures, or cultures of reconciliation, act to uphold hegemonic gender tendencies and prevent Trinidad's Domestic Violence Act from being enforced. She outlined the power of local norms and practices that influence how men and women make decisions about violence in their lives and how such decisions act to keep them out of legal processes. Further, she argued that family troubles are considered private matters and a gender hierarchy seems "natural." Illustrating the importance of studying the role of cultural influences on communication, she noted that such cultural precepts, built on foundations of a history of colonialism, slavery and indentureship, dissuade victims of violence from pursuing legal remedies (2003).

Along with the need to recognize historical and contextual factors and struggle over status and resources, the uniqueness and resistance of the diverse peoples of T&T also becomes a call for more nuanced approaches to understanding the relationships between culture and conflict. Alongside intergroup conflicts over resources and work with institutions, Miller (1997) observed common rituals, celebrations, and shared notions of being Trinidadian, and ignoring transnational factors that should have counted against such widespread adherence to common norms: "In Trinidad, one finds that people identify things and events that comprise 'Trini' culture. In addition to Carnival, Christmas, music, literature, dance and good food, my interviewees took pride in Trinidad's relative wealth, literacy, health care, and general modernity and development" (p. 33). All such factors illustrate the need to investigate conflict further.

Dimensions of Cultural Variability and Conflict

A wide range of scholars have conducted cross-cultural, mostly cross-national, comparative research examining psychosocial dimensions on which national and ethnic cultural group members are predicted to vary. Numerous scholars have proposed psychosocial dimensions that are preferred by particular cultural groups and predicted to impact interaction as well as conflict and conflict resolution. These include high–low context (Hall, 1976), individualism–collectivism (Hofstede, 1991), collective identity–individual identity (LeBaron, 2003), high–low power distance, (Hofstede, 1991), expectations for hierarchical–horizontal relationships (LeBaron, 2003), emphasis on task achievement–relationship (Hofstede, 1991), and homogeneity–heterogeneity (LeBaron, 2003). Dimensions on which conflict resolution approaches vary have been identified as well including direct–indirect dealing as applied to conflict and mediation (Moore, 1996), and categorizations of societies as more modern or more traditional (Lederach, 1987). Modern versus traditional dimensions

pertain to (a) individualistic autonomy–family-oriented dependence; (b) professional–personal orientations; and (c) rational and formal–affective and expressive orientations.

Face concern related to self and other is yet another dimension of cultural variability that has received significant research attention in intercultural conflict (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Examining relationships between dimensions, Taylor (2002) as well as Ting-Toomey (2005) pointed out that in low-context cultures, "face" is associated with an individualistic approach and is important to self-esteem; whereas in high-context cultures, "face" may be more often associated with the larger group and view of self is constructed in relationship to others. One approach may be to "separate the people from the problem" which is reframing the problem as one of interaction between parties, rather than identifying the problem within the other person. The former fits with linear, analytic thinking more often found in low-context cultures. In high-context cultures where face is grounded in the group, separating the people from the problem may not be possible, or at least much more difficult. However, members of low-context cultures may value privacy and autonomy and those in high-context cultures may value maintenance of social connections. In low-context cultures, directness in expression of thought and feeling is valued, whereas in high-context cultures indirectness as part of the form of politeness is required to maintain social face.

The dimensions outlined above, even when discussed as interrelated dimensions, are often conceptualized as continua; however, in application, discussion, and conclusion sections of research studies, national groups are often described in a short-hand, essentialist way (Chuang, 2003) as in "Trinidadians are collectivistic." Because of Trinidadian colonial history and complex cultural variability, the most common dimensions can emerge as overgeneralizations and misrepresent within-group differences in Trinidad. Collier et al. (2001) and Chuang (2003) argued that dimensions of cultural variability, such as collectivism or individualism, should not be equated with national style of communication, nor viewed as separate, isolated dimensions, nor as either/or dichotomies. They argue that such tendencies and preferences should be identified as not only interrelated, but contingent, contextually variant, and sometimes contested. To answer the calls for identifying structurally informed, contextually contingent, and locally generated trends of communicative conduct, we looked for dialectic tensions that emerged in community members' descriptions of communication conduct and normative preferences in conflict.

Theoretical Perspective and Assumptions

We combine interpretive and critical orientations to inquiry. First, we wish to provide a space for Trinidadians to share their own views and experiences in their own words about conflict and conflict management that is consistent with interpretive orientations to inquiry (see Thompson and Collier, 2006).

We also recognize the heterogeneous cultural composition of Trinidad, and, consistent with critical approaches to inquiry (Thompson & Collier, 2006), our goal is to minimize tendencies to over-generalize about Trinidadians. We seek to appropriately contextualize our study and problematize moves to develop training programs for conflict practitioners that would include overly broad generalizations. Therefore, we begin with first-hand interview discourses to generate trends and preferences, if any (Avruch, 1998). Another goal is to examine the conditions that make any emergent trends and preferences contingent, such as the type of conflict, relationship, and situation. We give attention to contradictory and contested preferences, as well as do justice to additional emergent dimensions that are unique to Trinidad.

Our interpretive and critical perspective to the study allows the interviewees to speak from their own experiences and to generate descriptions that may or may not confirm the dimensions of cultural variability from previous studies. We orient toward the cultural dimensions as dialectic tensions and therefore presume, for example, that individuals who align with the same cultural identity groups may demonstrate preferences for both individualism and collectivism. As Collier (2009) has shown in research based on interviews with young female participants in a Middle East peace-building program, when scholars approach these dimensions as dialectical, both/and tensions, rather than dichotomous, opposite choices, the validity and relevance of overall claims and conclusions is increased. We also give attention to the role of context, structural factors such as histories, institutional policies, and practices such as court and police procedures, which are often not taken into account in the research of cultural dimensions of cultural variability (Collier et al., 2002).

METHODS

Procedures

An interview guide was designed jointly by the members of the research team. All co-authors are female and have university appointments as well as practitioner experience in social work and/or conflict. A single in-depth interview was conducted by a group of research assistants in Trinidad who were trained by the research team members. The interview guide elicited information from respondents about (a) a recalled conflict situation; (b) how the conflict was resolved; (c) descriptions of how their parents or grandparents might have resolved similar conflicts; and (d) preferences for third-party intervention. Respondents who were acquaintances of the interviewers, who had experienced conflict and were willing to talk about their experiences, were invited to participate in interviews. We also sought to interview male and female respondents who had diverse ethnic identities in order to be more consistent with the demographic diversity of the island and to allow multivocality to emerge. Informed consent procedures were

followed and, with respondents' permission, the interviews were tape-recorded. The interviews were then transcribed by the research assistants.

Respondents

Nine of the 16 respondents were male, and respondents were predominantly in their 20 s to 40 s in age. The responses quoted below come from 11 of the respondents, 4 of whom were female. In all cases we use the self-reported labels offered by respondents; for example, "mixed race" and "African and Indian." Of the 11, 4 identified as African, 3 as Indian, and 4 as mixed race.

Types of Conflict Described

Each respondent offered one or more instances of conflict which we grouped into three categories. There were three organizational conflicts, four family conflicts, and four "neighborhood" conflicts (which included interpersonal conflict between a shopkeeper and neighborhood resident, between a homeowner and a contractor friend, and resident with the police).

Coding and Analysis of Data

All responses from interviews were transcribed verbatim. The 4 researchers, who did not participate in the interviews, acted as coders and analyzed the data using a modified version of the system proposed by researchers such as Boyatzis (1998) and Strauss (1987). The 4 analysts represented both "cultural insider" and "cultural outsider" perspectives in that 2 identify as Trinidadian and 2 identify as U.S. American. This combination of outsider and insider coding is recommended by Tanno and Jandt (1994) and insider–outsider dialogue has been used by Collier (2005) in order to increase cultural validity through featuring insider familiarity and also guarding against cultural bias, as well as recognizing and countering tendencies for unrecognized privilege or colonial models to dominate interpretations.

In the first phase of coding, 3 analysts individually read the transcripts of all individual interviews to gain a holistic picture of the overall responses. Then each individual coder identified broad thematic topics that included a cross-section of respondents' comments. Spradley (1979) defined a theme as "any cognitive principle, tacit or explicit, recurrent in a number of domains [at least two] and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning" (p. 186).

In the second phase of coding, the fourth coder, a Trinidadian, read through the themes and selected quotations to address intercoder reliability (i.e., the extent to which portions of text grouped under the same thematic code represented similar phenomena) and the completeness of the code list. Then the 4 coders engaged in a conversation about each theme and the

particular quotations from the transcripts that illustrated the theme. When all coders reached consensus about the definition of the theme and examples, the theme became part of the reported analysis. Thus, inter-coder reliability was 100% among 3 coders in the first phase and among 4 coders in the second phase. Validity was ensured in three ways: by combining insider and outsider cultural perspectives; by extensive discussion of the themes with all of the coders; and by reliance upon the respondents' descriptions in order to identify themes. The resulting themes reported below met the criteria of having at least five occurrences or of being mentioned by at least 5 respondents.

We organize our analysis by first discussing three themes that emerged across all three conflict types (family, neighborhood, and organizational). Next, we discuss two themes that emerged as applicable to two types of conflict. For each preferential theme, we analyze the dimensions of cultural variability. Throughout our analysis, we include in-depth quotations from respondents, to feature their voices and to provide evidence for the reader to assess the validity and coherence of the theme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Christian Principles Provide Guidance for Dealing With Diverse Conflicts

Several respondents explicitly described teachings of Christianity that suggested values and practices for dealing with conflict. These preferences emerged across different types of conflict such as neighborhood, family, and organizational. Christian principles that were mentioned included forgiveness, not holding grudges, and respecting parents. A pastor offered a detailed description of what he called "fundamental principles for dealing with conflict," the most important of which is "come to me first." His summary of a process for conflict resolution described in the *Bible* was very similar to patterns of preferences expressed by many respondents. The steps featured the use of a direct dealing approach, "if you have a matter against your brother, go to him." Then, if the person doesn't want to listen, the next step is to bring a witness. If that is not successful, then one should take the person to the elders.

> #4 (male, African): Jesus Christ is the righteous; he is the mediator . . . God is the one who signs off on the agreement . . . once we stick to the fundamental principles of the word of almighty God, we shall surely, surely solve all problems in our churches and in our lives as well . . . . the word says, "Come to me first." If you have a problem with me, come to me first, and if I don't listen to you, then you take it somewhere else . . . I think once you walk out, that you're disrespecting me, you're disrespecting God, you're disrespecting yourself . . . I want to work by a principle I have in my mind. See after 25 years, you know, in one

type of job, it's a principle: "You have something to say, come and say it."... the Bible says, "if you have a matter against your brother, go to him." That is the first step, go to him. Tell him "Johnny crack, fix that." Work it through. If he don't want to listen the Bible say take the next step, bring a witness, uhh, bring a witness. The Bible say if that not working, take him to the elders. So there is a process for conflict resolution in the church. And it is written, that is a manual for mediation in the church.

One respondent was motivated by religious beliefs and principles to work the conflict out.

#1 (female, mixed race): Well I'm a Christian and she's a Christian, so we know of some Christian people, and we'd go to the church because of the... hmmm I hope I find the right word, hmmmm... because of how genuine the person will be, that they will be honest to voice whatever opinion they have.

Living up to religious principles in terms of their own conduct was an important value for 2 respondents recalling an organizational and a neighborhood conflict and illustrating the force of this traditional approach (Lederach, 1987) to dealing with conflict.

#7 (male, Indian & African): Well that's just the type of person I am. My life is based on the word of God so the reason I wanted to resolve the conflict, because as a child of God I don't believe I should be walking around with grudges against people.

Theme 2: Both Acknowledging Hierarchy and Preferring Equitable Relationships Are Appropriate in Diverse Conflicts

Respondents explicitly described issues related to power and status in their recalled conflicts. Their comments demonstrated that they saw power as taking different forms and emerging from several sources. They talked about individuals' roles and positions in organizations, their level of access to resources (financial, institutional, and social), abilities to influence others in their relationships, and majority/minority representation. Status hierarchies among parties were described to be important because respondents recognized that those with higher status have the potential to influence others. The two respondents below described these views related to an organizational and a family conflict.

#12 (male, mixed race): Well these fellahs had quite a bit of power. Like I said they were at the top strata; these are people in charge of making policy decisions on housing and any other things that would affect their subordinates. These guys were the top brass at the high end.

#6 (male, Indian): There is a disproportionate power imbalance in his favor and I'll tell you why. He, through another close relative of his, in his immediate family, has very close ties with a known religious organization who is very prominent in this country. And he has made it, well, not only him, but his mother, made it especially clear, that she would have called upon that known religious organization to assist if necessary. And nobody could tell them what to do.

When asked to talk more about power differences in a dispute involving someone she supervised, one respondent mentioned the potential for educational level and economic position to create status difference.

#1 (female, mixed race): Ok definitely education . . . the individual knew that I was furthering studies. And financial background, I don't know if that was a determining factor, but I am more financially stable.

Another respondent described how an eldest brother was accorded status in a family conflict:

#8 (female, mixed race): He was very dominant because, uhm, being the eldest brother, that's one. He was also a police officer . . . my parents kind of looked up to him . . . I suppose he assumed, it was his perception that because of that, you know, he should have gotten the house.

Another respondent recalled when institutional representatives described institutional policies that were supposed to be influential but weren't very much help in constraining peoples' conduct around environmental health risks. The comments below illustrate that status hierarchies and power are situational and negotiated in relationships between institutional representatives and community members.

#6 (male, Indian): We did call upon the public health inspector; we did call upon the Environmental Management Authority. We did call upon several other agencies only to be told that there was very little they can do . . . the EMA told us that it was their instructions to just caution people but not shut them down because they [the parties accused of polluting] have a business.

Respondents also described status as referring to majority/minority relationships, with those in the majority having higher status. However, even when one's cultural background and views were positioned into being in the minority, one respondent still outlined expectations for others from majority positions to use a direct dealing approach (Moore, 1996) in an organizational conflict.

#15 (female): She had majority on her side, I don't know if probably how I'm an Indian and she's a Negro, everybody was Negro inside there, I'm

the only Indian was working there., Everybody side with her; they say she had the most standard. So I say ok, fair is fair and I left it so. But don't do things without telling me to my face, you know just going without telling me anything.

Contextual conditions are an important consideration in understanding how parties in conflict negotiate their relative status and hierarchies, and how individuals exercise their individual agency to act. The respondent below described a conspiracy of voices of authority and adults in power, arguing that adults, parents, professionals, and teachers are likely to side with each other in family disputes, which limits the ability of a younger person to be heard.

> #11 (male, African): I really wouldn't have wanted one of the professionals because, like I said, my father, a man of prominence, a professional, and that, that feeling of distrust would have been that they would have taken his side . . . Honestly you couldn't go to teachers because there's a conspiracy sense of adults being in that type of thing together, mostly adults in power. Had you gone to a teacher to complain seriously, they wouldn't have affected it because they would have seen that the parent was right.

The following comments illustrate a pastor's views of how status and dominance were negotiated in a dispute involving the pastor, members of his congregation, and his superior, the superintendent. In the pastor's view, the older heads of the congregation going to the superintendent, instead of coming to him directly, was a challenge to his authority and ability to run the church. As a result, the pastor took the risk of telling the superintendent that he expected support or would resign from the church.

> #4 (male, African minister): As a young leader, I expected support from the older heads . . . I expected them to support me and so my expectations were high . . . the anger came on when they went to the Superintendent, because the first time I heard about the protest against the issue was from the Superintendent . . . I had reach such a point that I tell the Super, "I am ready to give my resignation you know brother. Either you allow me to run it as God wants or quit it." That was the scene.

Another respondent's comments about his dispute with a contractor show that hierarchy is not just based on who hires whom, but point to negotiation of the relationship:

> #9 (male, Indian): Ahm, I would consider myself having more power than him, but ahm, he more or less took advantage of my generosity to an extent [proposing that he'd do the work later.]

Comments from another respondent below show that dominance and submissiveness are relative and dynamic, and it may be more useful for

conflict practitioners to think of these as dialectic tensions that ebb and flow over time. In addition, changing contexts and settings, situational events, relational history, etc., also contribute to shifting dominance and submissiveness. The respondent's comments illustrate that throughout the course of their relationship history, parties may be both dominant and submissive. At one point, he said he believed he had control in his relationship with his wife when they were first married. Later, after she had decided to stay in the United States, he described begging her to come back.

> #10 (male, African): I think as the man I was more dominant, but she has had her own lee way; she had her own space.
>   [After his wife had been living in the United States]...I was actually begging her to come back to Trinidad.

In the examples below, the interviewers asked if the respondents viewed themselves as more dominant or submissive in their organizational and family conflicts.

> #12 (male, mixed race): In terms of my position in the establishment, yes. However, me as an individual, if I believe I am being unfairly treated, I will open my mouth and be vocal about it. Not in an abusive way but I'd let the parties involved, know where I stand.

Theme 3: Across the Three Types of Conflict Disrespectful and Offensive Verbal and Nonverbal Conduct Is Not Appropriate

This theme includes comments, questions, and topics that were viewed as disrespectful and offensive during conflict and showcases respondents' views of the importance of the quality of their interpersonal relationships. Respondents offered detailed descriptions of others' behaviors which were viewed as norm violations. They made clear distinctions between what was appropriate and inappropriate and offered examples that were described to be either "right" or "wrong" for the particular situation. Nonverbal and verbal messages seemed equally significant to respondents.

Verbal comments and questions that were inappropriate include comments that voiced negative judgments about parties or family members. References about personal life were described as inappropriate, especially in contexts in which others were present. Obscene language was also mentioned. Note the descriptions of a family conflict below.

> #6 (male, Indian): [He said] that my brother and I were jealous of him and the money he was making and how his business was growing and because of that jealousy we were trying to get him in trouble and close down his business...

The respondents' descriptions also revealed an acute sensitivity to messages about themselves or the nature of the relationship. Both male and female respondents described various nonverbal cues that signaled disrespect, aggressiveness, and a lack of transparency, which functioned to create mistrust. The description below points to "obscene" gestures in a neighborhood conflict.

> #7 (male, Indian & African): Well lashing or gestures that may be of an obscene nature.

In organizational conflicts, two respondents described the importance of nonverbal cues in communicating attitudes of rudeness or not being "above board."

> #12 (male, mixed race): If they have any kind of hand signals or any type of eye-contact or whatever they have to communicate one to another I would think is inappropriate because remember this discussion should be something that is above board. All the "lines" should be laid out to air and I would think any sort of hand movement and stuff would be inappropriate.
>   #1 (female, mixed race): . . . the eye that looks at you from the corner, on the corner, you know, like, 'Did you just say that?' You know, that kind of way? That kind of eye, the "evil eye." (laughter).
>   Interviewer: The "evil eye," is that we call the "cut eye?"
>   #1: Yes, that's the "cut eye," the "evil eye." . . . mannerisms you know, like hand movements . . . like "I've had enough," that kind of way . . . like your hand up in the air, you not saying anything . . . like if it is you're trying to say, "What next?" that kind of way. Or just simply sometimes the way you might pull a chair or rest down something, you know you'll do it in a loud and aggressive kind of way?

Some respondents told stories of recalled events in order to illustrate their views about what was inappropriate. These narratives included rich examples of verbal and nonverbal cues. For example, a pastor described how and why he felt disrespected when members of his congregation acted in a particular way by "going behind my back."

> #4 (male, African): [It is appropriate to] bring reasons, any reasons . . . it was inappropriate when they decided to communicate with my superior first rather than me and I had to respond by finding our members, to go and see . . . and then I had to forgive them without even listening to them . . . ahm, going behind my back . . . If you have a problem with me, come to me first, and if I don't listen to you, then you take it somewhere else . . . I think once you walk out, that you're disrespecting me, you're disrespecting God, you're disrespecting yourself.

Another respondent narrated an event that happened at work in which coworkers described the individual being at carnival instead of working.

Some respondents described the inappropriateness of using contradictory verbal and nonverbal cues, saying one thing but implying another. In the instance below, the respondent showed that the nonverbal cues, in the context of the particular conversation, revealed her feelings.

> #1 (female, mixed race): My actual words are, "Alrighty then." (laughter) but my action was more like a facial expression . . . disappointed, disappointed, disappointed.

One respondent, referring to his experiences in a family conflict, gave a detailed composite picture of some "rules" for communication that might have been useful in a meeting where others were present or one facilitated by a third party.

> #11 (male, African): I would not have wanted him to bring up either my mother's absence or my stepmother's illness because those would have been sensitive topics to me that he would have used as something to give him sway or advantage. Two, no interruptions . . . if I'm going to let him talk, he's going to let me talk. No interruptions when you're talking . . . Accuse if you have to, don't get upset if somebody has to accuse you again. Three . . . no cussing, swearing or profanity, no matter how upset you get. And no threats. Because again, I was bound by my word not to assault verbally or physically, my father in any way . . . if he had started, you have to pardon the colloquialism, "getting on stupid" I would have just removed myself from the situation because it would have appeared he wasn't listening.

Another respondent described questions about his family life or critique of his abilities to provide for his family as inappropriate conduct.

> #12 (male, mixed race): Any questioning regarding my family life because I don't think that would be the issue there . . . So I don't think anything regarding my family's operation would be appropriate because . . . the dispute is housing, right? . . . anything that would attack my role as provider for my family . . . any questioning to that effect I would have viewed as offensive because here I am, I moved into a scenario where I thought the housing accommodation was adequate and no fault of mine that the people did not hold up their end of the bargain . . .

In summary, the verbal and nonverbal messages described in rich detail by respondents in our study indicate that respondents recognize the importance of these messages as cues for understanding how others viewed their personal relationship and their status positioning in relationship to each other. They explained how they interpreted these cues to pinpoint intentions of others, to understand the others' attitudes, and to judge where they stood on the conflict issues. In addition, their descriptions of their experiences and

preferences also reveal how they negotiated their personal relationships and the dynamics of dominance and submissiveness and having more/less agency. The respondents' comments implicate an ideology of interpersonal relationships and conflict management that can be summed up as valuing mutual respect with no one person having an advantage. The norms described seem to reflect a need to protect self face (Ting-Toomey, 2005), individualism in more formal organizational contexts, a combination of individualism/collectivism, and high- and low-context—given the richness of descriptions of verbal and nonverbal cues—and honoring self- and other-face in disputes where the interpersonal relationships were longer in duration.

The respondents in our study also seemed to prefer transparency and consistency in verbal and nonverbal cues. They detailed exchanges and moments when another's attempt to gain advantage over them, to position themselves as "better than" through criticism or nonverbal gestures, were offensive. Another theme in the comments above is very consistent with previous descriptions of issues driving conflicts; personal issues and family concerns were to be kept private; it was viewed as inappropriate to probe these issues in contexts that were public.

Theme 4: Honor Traditional Practices of Involving a Trusted Elder and Protect Family Privacy in Family and Neighborhood Conflicts

Many respondents described norms of keeping conflict private and within the family. They also described community and traditional practices used to deal with conflict in past generations.

> #6 (male, Indian): No matter what, we have it in the family. If something happened the public would never know. If something happened to one relative, everybody would be there to help so they [public] would never know that they [relatives] were at war .... they always spoke of, you know, resolving conflicts in a family way and you would get an older head to bring everybody together, try to reason it out and try to bring some sense of justice and fair play still maintaining good relations. I know this existed for a while. How effective it may have been I cannot say. But I know I recall them talking about that, they always refer to an older head getting everybody together and trying to reason it out and you know, trying to be the umpire, as it would.

Other descriptions referred to turning to respected members of the community to act as a third party in the conflict.

> #9 (male, Indian): What they used to do was long ago the older folks use to sit together, discussing the issues and they were the ones who more or less came up with the solution. So they would probably consult an elder

neighbor whom they prefer in the area, someone they held in a bit high in society etc. And ahm, that person would share their advice and based on that advice they would come to a solution.

#1 (female, mixed race): I know that people had what you called a "truce" and they said, "well, you doing this and you doing that' and they'd do something and come to an agreement. And they decide, well, you no longer do this, and I no longer do that . . . you know one community . . . they have like a chief; they have a leader, who would meet with this one and that one and "walk" [in their shoes]? You know, along that line.

#4 (male, African): Ah . . . really the church and its fundamental tradition of resolving conflict has not really changed. It has not changed and from the good old Pentecostal church that I used to . . . the only thing that has really changed is that we have high tech equipment, bigger, grander buildings. But the principles by which it ran has not changed. As a young man growing up people come to the pastor to solve problems. When people were in problem with the pastor, they came to the village priest.

The descriptions reflect a combination of calling on someone both known and trusted, as well as a person whom the group places in a position of authority. This reliance on a family or community elder is consistent with more of a pure formal model of mediation (Moore, 1996) and what Lederach (1987) described as more traditional, rather than modern. There is an emphasis on direct dealing (Moore, 1996); however, there are overlapping preferences for combining formal and informal, direct and indirect, emphasizing task and relationship, and including traditional and modern approaches to family and neighborhood conflicts. The complex picture shows that while Trinidad has moved through various periods of colonization and is experiencing economic development and globalization, there may be preferences at present for norms in conflict that integrate past traditions and present contextual changes into modernity.

Theme 5: Direct Dealing is Preferred in Organizational Conflicts and a Combined Direct and Indirect Approach Is Preferred in Family Conflicts

In organizational conflicts, there appeared to be a strong "direct dealing" approach toward conflict (Moore, 1996). This tendency is consistent with cultural norms prescribing individualism, a lower context approach, bringing the issues out into the open sooner rather than later, and attempting to manage conflict in face-to-face discussions. Moore contrasted this with "indirect dealing," which is found in more homogeneous and "harmonious" societies. In these societies, Moore argued that it is seen as disrespectful, disruptive, or even shameful, to be in conflict with others.

In our study, the majority of respondents said they first went to the person with whom they were in conflict and tried to work it out. In some cases,

the direct approach seemed to have utility toward resolution and in other cases it did not, but there was a propensity to "face" the problem directly and unashamedly. Selected illustrations are listed below.

> #12 (male, mixed race): If I believe I'm being unfairly treated, I will open my mouth and be vocal about it, not in an abusive way but I'd let the parties know.
>
> #4 (male, African): I like face to face confrontation when dealing with issues that are brought against me. I prefer, for me, in resolving things, is to try to use a more informal way. When people have conflict with me, I want to go face to face and deal with the issues. I like to get down and sort of work in the background to resolve what I know is a present conflict.

In one neighborhood dispute, the respondent below reported avoiding the conflict for some time but then approached the person.

> #7 (male, Indian & African): I was able to cope with the person's attitude but there was a point where it became overbearing…so I stop patronizing her shop…I realize that that is not the type of person I am and despite her attitude I cannot keep living like that…so one day I went to her, we pull aside, and we poke. I told her how I felt, I didn't like such and such. She told me she understand, she apologize, we hug.

In family disputes, however, while there was an emphasis on direct dealing, there was also concern for maintaining cordial and close relationships and elements of indirect approaches. The comments below demonstrate the value of maintaining relationships as well as directly dealing with issues.

> #16 (female, African): Well usually I will go to her and end up talking to her after a time…[the relationship] remained, but with respect, because she respect me for what I think.
>
> #6 (male, Indian): I was the only one prepared to speak out and although we had maintained good relations for all the years, at this point I realized that subtle suggestions and hints were not working and I had to approach him directly…Family was meant to live on good terms, to be supportive of each other, and to assist in times of need, to celebrate in times of joy and so on. For me I would like to see that level of relationship restored. I certainly would not want my family members to be in a situation where there's always the possibility of some outburst or some further conflict.

In sum, while respondents' comments showed a preference for directly dealing with conflict issues, the type of the conflict is important to consider. For instance, in family conflicts, directly dealing with issues needed to be balanced with maintaining cordiality and respect. The examples show that

both individualistic tendencies to assert views and deal with problems as well as collectivistic concerns for family relationships are evident.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, there are several important findings that add to previous literature on culture and conflict, enrich knowledge about this particular region, and point to the need for extending present theories and models of conflict. First, assessing even a small number of community members' views of conflict provides a clearer idea of the types of conflicts experienced and what Trinidadians view as appropriate and inappropriate conduct in conflict. The information from this study, though preliminary and exploratory, offers important information that is relevant to the development of contextually and culturally relevant models of conflict resolution and third-party intervention.

The respondents' descriptions indicate that the context and type of conflict matters and that what respondents describe as appropriate and inappropriate varied in recalled organizational, family, and neighborhood disputes. Across the organizational conflicts described, personal face issues were important, and a preference for, or recollection of going directly to talk to the others involved, was most common. In the family conflicts, family relationships and family image in the eyes of the community were important, so directly dealing with the family member in relationally supportive ways was described. These approaches were complimented by incorporating past traditions of consulting a trusted elder in the community.

Considering the small number of respondents in our exploratory study, we were unable to identify any conclusive discursive trends or conflict norms across intersecting racial, ethnic, and gendered cultural identities. Given some shared preferences for direct dealing, for example, among our respondents who identified with diverse ethnic and gender locations, but also the importance of situational contingencies, more interviews with community members aligning with various cultural identity positions are certainly needed in future research.

The prevalence of comments about the role of religion by both Africans and mixed race respondents, and the lack of descriptions of conflict involving structural issues such as economic challenges or the criminal justice system are noteworthy and warrant further attention by conflict specialists in Trinidad. Boodoo (2007) wrestled with post-colonial questions about Caribbean and Catholic identities that are relevant to our results. He noted that Caribbean identity is comprised of a space of agency, and more study is needed on the ways that group members exist in what he calls in-between spaces that require continuous negotiation and rephrasing/reinterpreting of relationships. He called for going beyond positioning Caribbean identity as post-colonial victim or innocent performer of hospitality rituals; he

advocated for recognizing colonizing influences as well as recognizing individuals' actions and discourses that reveal enactment of agency. With regard to Catholicism, he argued that Catholic identity in the Caribbean centers upon how Caribbean believers act and negotiate spaces in a colonial, dominant cultural institutional framework. The emphasis on Christianity and number of references to Catholicism in our study, therefore, may be a reflection of not only a part of a colonial legacy and ideologies of the church, but also local interpretations and actions revealing the situated use of Christian principles in the service of individuals choosing actions to address conflict issues and mend relationships. Lazarus-Black (2008) echoed this call for attention to agency as fluid and dynamic, involving contextualized interactions within structural constraints.

Another notable finding in our responses is that respondents offered clear examples of both acknowledging persons in positions of authority and questioning status differences. A more complex combination of high–low power distance (Hofestede, 1991) and the cultural dimension of expectations of hierarchical relationships–expectations of horizontal relationships (LeBaron, 2003) might account for the responses of our interviewees.

Our data suggests that it may be useful for conflict scholars as well as practitioners designing conflict management and third-party processes to probe community members' experiences of, and responses to, negotiating differences in status and privilege; these issues warrant further scrutiny. While respondents in our study described their desire to be respected and to have their voices heard, and were willing to directly approach other parties to raise issues in conflict, the ways in which higher status enabled some voices to be heard more strongly, or some parties to take necessary actions, needs further research. As Camps (2007) argued in her work about theater as a restorative justice strategy, both structural power that determines formal authority and access to resources, as well as personal power in relationships, are important in understanding the sociocultural landscape of Trinidad.

In sum, with regard to previous research on dimensions of cultural variability, our study calls into question approaches that would characterize Trinidadians as either individualistic or collectivistic, high or low context, task or relationally oriented, direct or indirect, and traditional or modern. The responses indicated that while individualistic tendencies were more common in organizational disputes, and collectivist tendencies emerged in family disputes, the descriptions were contingent upon the type of organization (church, workplace, or housing office) and nature of the relationship between parties. Respondents described in detail both verbal and nonverbal norms of appropriate conduct, implicating both low and high context dimensions, in organizational disputes. Overall, given our respondents' interviews, the dimensions of cultural variability would be best approached by conflict specialists as contextually variant and situationally negotiated, as dialectic, both/and tensions. As Bhabha (1994) argued when approaching post-colonial

identity negotiation, and Harris (1995) echoed in work on Caribbean culture, identity is not about predicting from or explaining group conduct through their essential qualities, but by examining discourses and actions in historical context and in contextually situated relationships.

We have sought to honor the voices of a selected few who identify as Trinidadian to showcase the complex ways that conflict is experienced and managed. We look forward to future explorations of the role of contextual negotiation and cultural complexities as research in conflict management and third-party interventions moves forward.

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