
4-23-2017

Exploring the Role of Culture in Communication Conflicts: A Qualitative Study

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Recommended APA Citation

Deep, S., Salleh, B. M., & Othman, H. (2017). Exploring the Role of Culture in Communication Conflicts: A Qualitative Study. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(4), 1186-1198. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2612>

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Abstract

This research article as a part of larger study intends to explore the role of culture in triggering communication conflicts among employees at the workplace. It also explores the role of Problem-based learning in resolving these culture based conflicts. Being a part of human life, conflict is a pervasive aspect of the socio-cultural and professional environment, especially at the workplace. The role of culture has one of the aspects that have played a pivotal role in initiating conflicts in the past. Using a qualitative research approach, this descriptive phenomenology study gathered data from semi-structured interviews from eighteen selected employees belonging to three development organizations in Pakistan. The research used a purposeful sampling to derive sample for the study. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic content analysis. The findings from this study reveal that different aspects of culture have a significant role in triggering communication conflicts among employees. The respondents, however, suggested that culture-based conflict could be reduced and tackled effectively through the training of employees on PBL approach which bring together people of diverse cultures on one table.

Keywords

Culture, Communication Conflicts, Workplace

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the three developing organization of Pakistan for this study. The authors appreciate the logistic and human resource support for their employees' trainings and subsequent interviews.

Exploring the Role of Culture in Communication Conflicts: A Qualitative Study

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This research article as a part of larger study intends to explore the role of culture in triggering communication conflicts among employees at the workplace. It also explores the role of Problem-based learning in resolving these culture based conflicts. Being a part of human life, conflict is a pervasive aspect of the socio-cultural and professional environment, especially at the workplace. The role of culture has one of the aspects that have played a pivotal role in initiating conflicts in the past. Using a qualitative research approach, this descriptive phenomenology study gathered data from semi-structured interviews from eighteen selected employees belonging to three development organizations in Pakistan. The research used a purposeful sampling to derive sample for the study. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic content analysis. The findings from this study reveal that different aspects of culture have a significant role in triggering communication conflicts among employees. The respondents, however, suggested that culture-based conflict could be reduced and tackled effectively through the training of employees on PBL approach which bring together people of diverse cultures on one table. Keywords: Culture, Communication Conflicts, Workplace

The modern-day workplace has become more culturally diverse with the increase in globalization and migration. To deliver culturally appropriate services and to understand the cultural factors that influence their work relationships and practices has become an important task for employees in the organizations (<http://etraining.communitydoor.org.au/>). Significant literature points out that because of the workers' differences in cultural values, attitudes, and work style, culturally diverse workplaces have become a hub of organizational conflicts (Borhan & Yassin, 2013). Occurring communication conflicts among employees in the workplace is therefore, the most common phenomenon emerging from the differences in employees' personalities and values (Sharma, Goyal, & Panwar, 2014)). Workplace conflict is often caused by the differences in employee's culture and their cultural belief and backgrounds (Daud, 2013). Employees coming from different backgrounds and caliber have diverse personalities. When employees fail to accept the differences in each other's personalities, problems arise in the workplace. When employees fail to accept the differences, co-workers may insult each other's character and experiences (Abdul Kadir, 2013; Nopiah, 2009; Razzaq & Ahsin, 2011a). Dealing with employee conflict in a timely manner is however important to maintaining a healthy work environment. Without any conscious effort of resolving the conflict and believing that a conflict will simply disappear, are inaccurate assumptions to make. These trivial conflicts often transform into severe complex conflicts with adverse impact on the employees and the organizations. Therefore, Organizations and employees must try to understand the common causes and sources of employee conflicts, so that a compatible strategy to the conflicting situation could be evolved accordingly.

One of most important sources of communication conflicts at workplace is based on culture. According to Queen Lands Council of Social Services, whenever there are cultural differences, there arise cross-cultural misunderstandings or conflict. The following are some potential situations in which happening of conflicts or a misunderstanding becomes inevitable;

- misinterpretation and miscommunication
 - conflict or misunderstandings between different nationalities, religious or ethnic groups
 - differences in cultural practice
 - cultural ignorance and insensitivity
 - lack of awareness of different societal lifestyle practices
 - differences in perception of illness and treatment
- (Queen Lands Council;
<http://etraining.communitydoor.org.au/mod/page/view.php?id=318>)

This study being a part of a larger research is an account of a descriptive study of communication conflicts of 18 employees from three organizations in the Pakistan. The study was carried out as there is not a considerable amount of empirical research on this issue in the existing literature globally (Daud, 2013) while none of any study found in Pakistani context as well. The following questions lead the objectives of the study:

- How the difference of culture play role in triggering communication conflicts if at all?
- What role if at all does PBL play in resolving conflicts based on cultural differences?

Review of Literature

In the current era, workplaces have developed into complex and culturally diverse places. Culture is a challenging variable to research because of the multiple divergent definitions and measures of culture (Brown & Race, 2014). Culture can however, be defined in a number of ways like Geert Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another (Stinson & Milter, 1996). Campbell (2000) defines culture as “a complex web of information that a person learns and which guides each person’s actions, experiences, and perceptions” (p. 38) and finally, Patricia Marshall (2002) defines it as “consistent ways in which people experience, interpret, and respond to the world around” (p. 8). While we may argue that none of these definitions seem to convey the meaning of culture completely but there are indeed some common elements to be found among them. All of these have in common the concept of “sharing” in that to be considered culture; they have to be found in many members of a group in the same way, over a period of time.

There are various definitions of communication but Dr. Gordon Coates give three simple of them, that is, Communication is the sharing of information; Communication is the giving and receiving of messages; Communication is the transfer of information from one or more people to one or more other people. The word itself is derived from the Latin verb *communicare*, which means "to share" or "to make common" (Savery & Duffy, 1995).

Defining conflict as an interaction between groups or individuals expressing opposing interests, views or opinions focuses on the communication that is has an important role in the development and dissolution of a relationship. Communication is simply the act of transferring information from one place to another. The word “conflict” is perceived differently by different people. There is no agreed upon definition. We therefore, put forth some of definitions to have an idea about the term. According to Bochantin, Interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals, aims, and values and who see the other party’s potentially interference with the realization of these 3 “Is” goals of Conflict: Interaction, Interdependence, Incompatible goals (Pratminingsih, 2009). According to Michael Nicholson “a conflict exists

when two people wish to carry out acts which are mutually inconsistent (Hogan, 2005). John Burton is of the view that conflict is a generic phenomenon that knows no system boundaries. Conflict indicates that individuals or groups perceive differences about interests, resources, opinions, values, or practices between themselves and others (De Dreu, 2008).

All the definitions of conflict reflect the following components of conflict, that is, two or more than two persons are involved in a conflict to occur; there is a perceived incompatibility among individuals between ideas, actions, beliefs, or goals; the hostile individual or group see their way as the only way to achieve their goals and objectives. Consequently, when people at work communicate verbally, or through any written medium, for their mutual interests, the communication conflict is bound to occur.

Culture based Communication conflicts occur at workplaces. Since the recorded history, there are evidence of conflicts between families, children, coworkers, superiors and subordinates etc. (Seren & Ustun, 2008).

Study Method

Being a development professional and having many years of working experience in multiple national and international organizations in NGO sector, as first author I had always been very enthusiastic to carry out research on some very crucial issues that used to hinder the prospering of employees and as well as the organizations to a greater extent. One of those issues was the occurring of frequent culture based communication conflict among employees at the workplace in Pakistan. I along with lots of others colleagues' suffered tremendously and experienced very tough, stressed and conflicting situations which usually used to result into a poor performance, low productivity, absenteeism and health issue in employees alongside the waste of organization's money and resources; sometimes the situation even ended into the resignation of many employees but no concrete measure were seen to be taken by those organizations nor there used to exist any conscious conflict resolution mechanism to reduce those conflicts. The controllable and uncontrollable factors that lead to these situations were although numerous but one of the most important controllable factor that I observed, was the lack of communication and essential soft skills in employees irrespective of their designation such as effective leadership, good management, effective communication skills, teamwork skills, research skills and most importantly conflict resolving skills etc. The lack of training opportunities for employees could also be made responsible for that state of affair. If even some of the training opportunities used to be arranged but at the same time the traditional methodology of those trainings would not produce any fruitful results of developing soft skills in employees except the rotting of content knowledge. I conclude by saying that my own experiences at the workplace attracted me to conduct my PhD research on this topic in order to contribute empirical research and findings on the subject matter to the literature.

As already mentioned, the author stayed familiar with the actual experiences by the employees interviewed and this firsthand knowledge by the author helped this study further. Therefore, in order to avoid the creeping of personal bias of the author in the analysis, "bracketing" was ensured. Bracketing refers to "self-awareness of mindset" of the researcher (Hutchinson, 1986, p. 115). Besides, the author wrote a personal statement of what experiences and perception he expected to have of culture based communication conflicts in order to become conscious of perceptions, values, and beliefs even before collecting data and during the process of research, (see Appendix B for the personal statement).

Since this article is a part of larger study of some of the parts of findings are left in this article. The sample for the study was taken with the help of researcher's previous workplace - Islamabad based Research and Training Consultancy Firm (RSDO). In this regard, three developing organizations namely Community Motivation Development Organization (CMDO)

Peshawar, Read Foundation and International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Islamabad, Pakistan served the population for this study. The selection of these organizations was based on the willingness on the part of head of these organizations. The researcher had contacted many organizations but three out of around six accepted the support and allowed their staff for the training and subsequent interviews. As the part of a larger doctoral study, this research effort selected eighteen respondents for the semi-structured interview out of the forty employees who got three days training based on PBL approach. The eighteen respondents out of total forty for qualitative study were chosen on the basis of their willingness. The sample had been filtered through criteria on the basis of their length of working experience and number of organizations served by a purposeful sampling approach. Since, the optimal sample depends on the purpose of the study, research questions, and richness of the data so there is no commonly accepted sample size for qualitative studies. (Marra, 2014).

The Qualitative method was used based on the descriptive phenomenology in order to explore the subject deeply. Not only data analysis was focused but this structured phenomenological approach also applied to the interviewing having questions based on the themes of capturing the phenomenon, contextualization of the experience, its clarification and exploration (Lesperance, 2008). The method involved structural and descriptive questioning and innovative use of imaginative difference in order to discover experiences.

The researcher took official permission from the head of three developing organizations from which the researcher drew a sample for this study. Besides, the research sought the informed consent of the respondents' before starting the study. The employees were debriefed on the description of the study at the beginning of the study so that they could be in better position to perceive the intervention and respond to the queries more confidently. As an ethical requirement, all the records and participants' identities were treated as confidential by hiding their affiliations and only revealing their designations.

This study used a semi-structured interview method to collect the data qualitatively (see Appendix A for the interview questions). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher asks a series of open-ended questions with accompanying queries that probe for more detailed and contextual data (Neufeld & Barrows, 1974). Semi-structured interview is a verbal interchange when one person, the interviewer, tries to elicit information from another person by asking questions. Although the researcher prepares a list of predetermined questions, but it provides the interviewer with a chance to explore what they feel are important (Wiske, 1998). The researcher opted for the semi-structured interview as the data collecting tool due to its suitability to the subject and its benefits over other tools such as it allows the researcher to be prepared well in advanced and appear competent during the interview ; besides, it also allow the respondents to express their views in their own terms (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980) as was required for this study. We used qualitative method in order to explore the subject deeply. Qualitative research is an approach to explore and understand the meaning- the individuals and group give to a social or human problem. (Razzaq & Ahsin, 2011b). All interviews were audibly recorded with the permission of the students being interviewed. All of the interview transcripts were read and organized by the researcher into themes and codes Thematic analysis based on the descriptive phenomenological approach was used. In all types of qualitative research, the process of thematic content analysis is indeed often very similar like the process involves going through the transcripts, identifying themes and gathering together examples of those themes from the text (Lin, 2002). The interview transcripts were read and organized by the researcher into themes and sub-themes through both deductive and inductive but predominantly the inductive approach; as some of the major themes were derived from literature while most of the themes and code were derived from the data. The data was organized then into themes, sub-themes and further into coding whenever deemed necessary. Thematic analysis is method of identifying, analyzing and interpreting themes in qualitative

research data (Januszewski, 2013). The researcher first went through the text and identified quotes that seemed somehow important. Each quote was cut out making sure to maintain the context with the reference name and then organize them into piles of similar quotes. After that each pile was named in accordance with repetition of concepts. The findings from each pile were drawn in order to give meaning to the data. The quotes are mentioned by the designation of the respondents to maintain their confidentiality.

As far as the validity of the data is concerned, two independent researchers from University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia were asked to verify and validate the accuracy of the categorization of themes and subthemes. After discussion with them, minor modifications were made to the analysis and coding. The inter-raters suggested to break up the larger theme (culture based conflicts) into sub-themes like conflicts occurring based on language, ethnicity, and race etc. The data was also validated by pictures and videos of the respondents being interviewed. The analyzed data was validated through sending it in written form to all the respondents for verification.

Study Design

Descriptive phenomenology design was used in order to explore the experiences of respondents regarding their culture-based conflicts among employees at the work place and assess the role of PBL approach in resolving culture based communication conflicts, developing conflict resolving skills and other soft skill development. The purpose of a descriptive study is actually to see the relationships between two or more phenomena or to provide an in-depth description of a phenomenon (Reiners, 2012). The common goals of a descriptive study involve describing program characteristics or intervention recipient or how they relate to one another, describing the process of intervention and ascertaining views of people on an issue in an opinion survey satisfaction survey or poll, documenting processes of program, its outputs and outcomes. Keeping in view these goals, semi structured interview was conducted after the conduction of three days training in order to ascertain the feelings and expression of the selected respondents about the intervention. While the knowhow of respondents about PBL approach was explored before starting the training. In three sets of trainings, not a single trainee had an idea about training delivery through PBL approach and its role in skill development. The soft skills were however, assessed through a survey before and after the intervention; the result of which is not presented here. In this situation, they were briefed a little at the beginning about the PBL approach and its learning process. After the PBL based training approach, a feeling and experiences of respondents were also explored about the intervention implemented through a semi structured interview.

Profile of Respondents

The respondents for this study belonged to three organizations presented in the following table

Table 1

Gender * Organization Cross tabulation

		CMDO	ICMC	Read Foundation	Total
Gender	Female	0	5	0	5
	Male	5	2	6	13
Total		5	7	6	18

The gender imbalance was quite expected as the two organizations did have female staff. Average age of the respondents was calculated as 32 years while the average length of working experience is 8 years of the total 18 respondents. Besides, the designations of the respondent were as the following

Designation of Employees

The three of the organizations provided their core staff which has employees from all the sections.

Child Protection Officer
 Donor relation Officer
 Program Manager
 Project Coordinator
 Program Director
 Finance Assistant
 Finance Manager
 HOD International relations
 HOD M&E
 HR Officer
 Interpreter
 Interpreter
 Assistant reporting officer
 IT Manager
 Livelihood Officer
 M&E officer
 Manager M&E
 Medical counselor

Around 90 % of the respondents expressed that they have experienced, and observed various types of culture based communication conflicts at workplace. They also talked about the main causes and effective resolution of these conflicts. According to these findings, language, ethnicity, traditions and values play important role in occurring conflicts among employees at the workplace Training or instructing through PBL can help create essential skills in learners which could further help them dealing with different situations at the workplace.

Results and Discussion

Role of Culture in Communication Conflicts

Workplaces are the hub of culture diversity so as the conflict also. Culture has always been an important factor and source in creating conflicts among employees at the workplace. These culture based conflicts exist more in the regions where there are more cultural variations (Avruch, 2009). These variations in the various aspects of culture tend to create different factors which further develop the state of conflict among employees. The respondents were inquired of their experiences and feelings about the role of culture in creating communication conflict.

Some of the quotes expressed by the respondents are the following:

There are culture based conflicts at workplaces. Culture plays an **important role** in any workplace. Actually, everyone wants to bring people of his culture to high positions by unfair means. Even decisions **of new appointments** are inclined towards people of required culture. In this regard, employees having **same language** play an important role. Besides, **belonging from same region** also affect decisions and **cause favoritism** at the workplace. As far as its **reduction and resolution** of culture based conflicts are concerned, it depends mostly on the leader or manager in a team whether to take out productivity from the diverse culture of people or negativity. An effective leader can make ensure the positive side from **diversity**. (M&E Officer)

One of the respondents also expressed that different values and traditions cause to occur communication conflicts.

I think people from **diverse culture** at workplace are one of the causes of communication conflicts at workplace. Every individual is **different** but if the **values, traditions** are extremely contrasted, it paves way for conflicts among employee. The culture based conflict can be **reduced and resolved** effectively through improving **good management and leadership**. (Program Director)

Another respondent blamed the geographical bases of initiating of conflicts among employees:

Culture does play a role in creating **communication conflicts**. Diverse culture creates problems for people at workplace. Usually culture based groups are formed on the basis of **geographical basis** at workplace who then promotes their own interest at the expense of others. As a result of **culture diversity**, favoritism and **injustice** flourish in organizations. Thus, the environment becomes **conductive** to arising **communication conflicts**. (Program Manager)

One of the respondents shared that culture based conflicts usually occur at the smaller organizations.

Culture based communication conflicts are more **frequent** especially at small organizations and in the organizations where the leadership is weak. There is lot of exploitation of employees based on the culture which **trigger stress**,

hatred and lack of trust in employees. These traits then lead toward **communication conflicts**. (HOD Donor Relations)

It can safely be concluded from the above quotations that that culture-based conflicts exists at the workplace due to different elements of culture like values, traditions, language, ethic, race and geographical affiliation. They usually occur due to weak leadership and management and they can lead to lack of trust, stress and hatred among employees. They can be reduced and tackled effectively through good leadership and training of employees at workplace.

The Role of PBL in Culture based Communication Conflicts

In order to overcome the cultural barriers and promote unity and collaborative learning within diverse student groups, small group tutorials in PBL can play an effective role (Singaram, Dolmans, Lachman, & Van der Vleuten, 2008). The respondents were inquired about the PBL approach effectiveness in reducing and resolving culture based conflicts at the workplace. Around 80% of the respondent favored PBL approach for enhancing increased understanding and reducing conflict in employees.

I think PBL approach can help in **reducing** culture based communication conflicts among employees at workplace as it helps to **bring together people** from diverse backgrounds on one platform to meet, discuss, **agree and disagree** on various solutions on the given problem. The various **skills experienced and acquired** through the group work help them to manage the disagreements at the real workplace. (Finance Manager)

Another respondent shared his opinions in the following words about PBL approach.

PBL is an effective tool to **increase** understanding and **reduce** culture based conflicts among employees as there are people of different culture in a PBL group who have to work together in **harmony** in spite of having **disagreement and confrontations**. Actually groups in PBL classroom are just like a workplace. This **compromise** within the group helps them to **manage things** with colleagues at future at workplace as well. (Livelihood Officer)

The respondents also talked about in response to a query at workplace.

People group together and there is **a lot of interaction** between them. This interaction can develop a lot of **skills and traits** in them which can help in reducing communication conflicts. While there also develop **great understanding** between different people during PBL sessions which may help them in the long run **at workplace**. (IT Manager)

Through the above-mentioned quotes, it is found out that PBL approach can help reduce culture-based conflicts due to its interactive nature and group working. Through this instructional approach, employees acquire a lot of skills and traits that help them in tackling conflicts and conflicting situations among employees. These conflicts and disagreement can effectively be managed and tackled through effective leadership and training of employees.

Discussion

Our study found out a significant role of language, tradition, values, and geography and ethnicity etc. in triggering communication conflicts among employees at the workplace etc. In response to our research question, the language, ethnicity, religion, race and affiliation with same geographical regions play a due role in creating rifts and conflicts among employees at the workplace especially in smaller organizations which remain detrimental to the well-being of employees and the greater interest of the organization. This results into creating stress, hatred, appointment and promotion of employees on favoritism, and injustice among employees at the workplace. As far as the second research is concerned, our findings revealed the significant impact of training approach based on PBL in reducing and resolving these culture based conflicts among employees through enhanced understating and through developing essential skills and traits in employees. So the findings approves the relationship of PBL approach and essential soft skills that further help in resolving and reducing culture based conflicts. While as for as effective resolution of conflicts is concerned, the study suggested that training of employees (sharping their skills and traits), good leadership could help reduce, manage and eventually resolve the communication conflict effectively at the workplace. The information and findings from this research could help employees and employers to look into these potential factors which could improve or disapprove the professional environment and learn how effectively workplace conflicts could be resolved in order to avoid its adverse outcomes. The findings of this study could be generalized to other developing organizations due to fact that the respondents who shared their feeling and perceptions had working experience in multiple developing organizations. The findings of this study are supported by a number of recent studies. One of the studies was conducted on value conflicts between counselors, or counselors-in-training, and their clients. The authors examined considerations that professional counselors are encouraged to take into account when value conflicts arise within the therapeutic relationship. The authors presented a strategy known as ethical bracketing and the Counselor Values-Based Conflict Model as tools to use when facing conflicts that arise in professional values (Borhan & Yassin, 2013). Another qualitative study explored the intensive care nurses' experiences of conflicts related to practical situations when they encounter culturally diverse families of critically ill patients. The study adopted focus group interview method to collect the data. Using content analysis, it concludes that nurses need to negotiate with culturally diverse family members to address conflicts. In their encounters with such families, they should establish a balance between ethnocentricity and cultural sensitivity (Mykytyn, 1994).

It is pertinent to mention that we have focused on the role of overall culture in triggering communication conflicts in developing sector organizations while future researcher could investigate and narrow down subject looking into each aspect or segment of culture playing a role in conflicts like language, ethnicity, and geography etc., its after-effects and subsequent reduction or resolution also in a different working sector.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to prevent issues of subjectivity or personal biases in qualitative research from influencing the research (Creswell, 2013). If the researcher is set on looking for something in particular, the meaning of findings could be particularly problematic. Although, I am not aware of any overt personal biases that may have influenced this study but I had written a statement of answers from the query beforehand to avoid overweighting the facts.

A number of limitations however, were involved in this study. First, even though I tried to take participants from three comparatively smaller developing organizations, the selected

sample was not representative of all the developing organizations in Pakistan. This limitation was covered through considering the previous work experiences of the respondents in various organizations across the country. Mostly respondents had working experiences in 4 or 5 organizations. Second, the sample was limited to the comparatively smaller organizations and also the institutional culture in all organizations is different, the results of this study might not be representative of other larger developing organizations. The similarities and differences may indeed, be found based on the particular context of employees they work, and apply the findings accordingly. Third, the researcher previous serving as development professional may be viewed as a considerable limitation and this concern may lead to concerns associated with doing “backyard research” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1999). This limitation however was covered through “bracketing” - writing the statement of expected response even before the data collecting process.

Conclusion

This descriptive phenomenological was conducted after a three days training of employees based on PBL approach. The study used qualitative approach to collect the data from the employees of three developing organizations through a semi- structured interview. The findings revealed that the different aspects of culture play a potential role in triggering communication conflicts among employees at the workplace in Pakistan while periodic instruction through a PBL approach could help reduce and resolve the conflict effectively. It was also found out that the diversity among employees at among different mind-set people to bring them on consensus. The differences can be reduced effectively through good leadership, management and training of employees on PBL process and approach.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview

Name	Age	Gender
Time	Designation	

Being a doctoral student at UTHM Malaysia, I welcome you to take part in research study on the "Use of Problem-Based Learning Approach for Employees Training" in Pakistan. The research is part of my doctoral thesis at the Faculty of Science Technology and Human Development in University Tun Hussein Onn of Malaysia. Taking part in research is open to everyone and your response will be recorded with complete confidentiality. You can also withdraw from survey at any stage of answering with no objection on my side. When responding to questions, you should keep in mind that your feelings and expression is going to contribute into the development of new research findings. Participation in research will not take more than maximum 15 minutes; your cooperation is therefore requested. Please note that this research study is approved by the faculty of Science, Technology and Human Development, UTHM Malaysia and I would like to thank you for your time and support in this regard.

Q 1) what role culture plays in triggering communication conflicts among employees at the workplace in Pakistan. Kindly give detailed response (ethnic Conflicts/ over values traditions /on language diversity etc.

Q 2) Can you kindly state the main causes of culture based communication conflicts among employees at workplace in Pakistan?

Q 3) How these conflicts can be reduced and resolved through PBL training approach effectively.

Appendix B: Personal Statement

The author expects the existence of culture based conflict at the workplace in Pakistan.

- Culture based conflicts exist in developing organizations due to the multi-cultural society of Pakistan.
- The different culture often becomes the only source of triggering communication conflicts among employees at the workplace in Pakistan.
- According to the belief of researcher, the culture based communication conflicts are effectively resolved through PBL training approach.
- PBL approach can develop enhanced understanding between people of different culture

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The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the three developing organizations of Pakistan for this study. The authors appreciate the logistic and human resource support for their employees' trainings and subsequent interviews.

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Article Citation

Deep, S., Salleh, B. M., & Othman, H. (2017). Exploring the role of culture in communication conflicts: A qualitative study. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(4), 1186-1198. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss4/15>
