American Journal of
Education and Practice
(AJEP)

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American Journal of Education and Practice
ISSN 2520-3991 (Online)
Vol.8, Issue 6, pp 1 – 27, 2024

www.ajpojournals.org

Exploring How Makerere University Academic Deans Utilise theirPsychological Capital Optimism in the Management of Conflicts

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Article history

Submitted 20.10.2024 Revised Version Received 25.11.2024 Accepted 31.12.2024

Abstract

Purpose: In this study, I aimed at exploring how Makerere University academic deans utilise their psychological capital optimism in the management of conflicts. And thereafter develop a psychological capital-based conflict management framework.

Materials and Methods: In this study, I adopted a qualitative approach, through a phenomenological research design, I conducted this study at Makerere University in Kampala district. Data collection involved in-depth interviews using purposive sampling techniques, targeting 14 deans from the 9 colleges within Makerere University choosing 5 females and 9 males. I applied thematic analysis to the data based on the study's objectives.

Findings: Study results on the utilization of psychological capital optimism by Makerere University deans in conflict management reveals contrasting approaches rooted in gender and cultural influences. Deans that demonstrated unrealistic optimism, tended to externalize failures, emphasize individual accountability, and micromanage conflicts, often neglecting inclusivity and missing opportunities for learning and relationship-building. Conversely, deans with flexible optimism, adopt a pragmatic and adaptive approach. They assess conflicts comprehensively, recognizing their complexities, and employ proactive problem-solving strategies that prioritize collaboration and growth. This study underscores the value of flexible optimism in fostering resilience, inclusivity, and constructive conflict resolution within organizations. I developed a framework to enhance the use of psychological capital constructs in conflict management.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Makerere University should support training for realistic optimism such that deans develop the ability to accurately assess conflicts and make informed decisions that prevent overconfidence and unrealistic expectations. Additionally, Makerere University should develop inclusive conflict management policies that mandate inclusive and collaborative conflict resolution processes that are gender and culture centered.

Keywords: *Psychological Capital Optimism, Conflict Management, Academic Deans, Utilization, Makerere University*

JEL Codes: I23

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Recent studies in career development, positive psychology, and organizational behaviour have identified optimism as a key factor influencing individuals' future visions, which are crucial to their lives. High levels of optimism and low levels of pessimism contribute to a positive outlook on the future (Korkmaz and Doganulku, 2022). Optimism varies among individuals; some may view the glass as half empty, while others see it as half full, influenced by genetics, negative events, parenting styles, and other environmental factors (Forgeard and Seligman, 2012).

Some scholars link optimism to future planning (Ginevra et al., 2017), while others describe it as how people interpret their successes and failures (Seligman, 1990). According to Akca et al. (2018), optimism involves having generally positive expectations about situations or the future. In this section, and throughout this study, optimism was understood as an emotional competence that fosters positive expectations among university managers. This competence helps them manage conflicts efficiently and effectively, enhancing productivity, boosting employee morale, and promoting competitiveness in higher education.

Optimism contributes significantly to human life in various ways. Research indicates that optimistic individuals tend to be future-oriented and even plan their lives accordingly (Ginevra et al., 2020). Their elevated optimism leads them to expect more which in turn motivates them to strive harder (Ginevra et al., 2017). Consequently, scholars such as Coelho et al. (2018) have highlighted optimism as a crucial construct associated with numerous management variables and the enhancement of social relationship quality. This suggests that highly optimistic individuals are predisposed to engage in and resolve conflicts in ways that maximize mutual benefit in both personal and professional contexts, thus fostering positive social relations that drive positive outcomes in life and work.

After all, Barkhuizen et al. (2014) discovered that while a lack of job resources contributes to burnout and conflict in higher education institutions, dispositional optimism has a strong positive effect on perceptions of job resource scarcity, thereby reducing burnout levels in universities. Moreover, a longitudinal study examined whether optimists and their romantic partners experienced greater relationship satisfaction due to optimists perceiving greater support from their partners. The study found that both optimists and their partners reported higher relationship satisfaction, mediated by the optimists' greater perceived support. During conflict conversations, couples saw each other as engaging more constructively, leading to better conflict resolution (Srivastava et al., 2006). Despite the age of this publication and its different context, its findings are relevant to the current study. They suggest that individuals who anticipate positive outcomes are likely to achieve them. For university managers, this implies a tendency to choose positive conflict management strategies, leading to the anticipated positive outcomes.

Additionally, Renaud et al. (2018) argue that optimists generally expect positive outcomes across various life domains. Similarly, Zou et al. (2015) found that in conflict management, optimistic managers are more likely to adopt collaborative strategies, while less optimistic managers tend to avoid conflict. This can be attributed to the fact that optimistic individuals often take credit for successes and seek opportunities that fulfil their positive expectations of future success (Luthans et al., 2007). Therefore, they prefer collaborative conflict management to avoid the setbacks and stresses associated with avoidance strategies. Nonetheless, even when setbacks occur, highly optimistic individuals view them as challenges and opportunities rather

than failures. They often use their positive dispositions to buffer distress and other negative emotions (Zou et al., 2015).

Furthermore, optimism has been shown to foster resilience among individuals dealing with daily stressors and conflicts arising from the tasks they must accomplish. This is because optimism encourages positive thinking, prioritization, and the use of positive conflict management strategies, enabling individuals to focus on their tasks more harmoniously. Personal resources such as optimism are linked to more positive appraisals of stressful situations and the adoption of active, approach-related coping strategies, including positive reappraisal and active acceptance (Balasubramanian and Fernandes, 2022). Additionally, the positive emotions inherent in optimism and resilience can enhance the ability to cope with work-related interpersonal conflict by sustaining coping efforts and restoring depleted resources (Martinez-Corts et al., 2015). Hermayani and Insan (2021) also found a significant positive relationship between optimism and problem-solving or conflict management.

In the realm of management and decision-making, Monehin and Diers-Lawson (2022), viewing through the lens of strategic conflict management theory, highlight optimism as a crucial trait in successful crisis leadership, leading to positive outcomes for teams and organizations. Their conclusion stems from the observation that successful conflict managers employed contingency strategies, reflecting personal success characteristics like optimism. Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) emphasize that organizations, including universities, depend on their leaders to navigate crises and conflicts, despite the complexities involved. Optimistic leaders are more likely to manage crises effectively, while pessimistic leaders often falter under pressure. High levels of optimism have been prospectively linked to better subjective well-being during adversity, greater engagement, and lower levels of avoidance or disengagement. Optimism is associated with taking proactive steps toward positive outcomes (Carver et al., 2010).

In the context of family management, Khodaei et al. (2016) suggest that fostering optimistic thinking and positive problem-solving styles can increase optimism, reduce the severity of conflicts, decrease non-adaptive strategies, and improve interpersonal conflict resolution skills. Similarly, Suh and Shin (2016) found that conflict communication between adolescents and their parents affects adolescents' conflict-coping styles differently. Adolescents who had open communication with their mothers displayed higher levels of optimism, leading to more positive conflict-coping styles.

Conversely, some scholars have found conflicting results regarding how different aspects of optimism influence responses to conflicts or challenges. While Srivastava et al. (2006) assert that optimistic individuals typically adopt positive and constructive conflict management strategies, other research, such as that by Neff and Geers (2013), suggests that optimism can sometimes be a liability. They argue that expecting the best might prevent individuals from taking proactive steps when facing difficulties. Additionally, Chou (2024) has observed that realistic optimism should intertwine the contradictory elements of objective judgment and a positive outlook. In that line, Neff and Geers (2013) recommend focusing on how optimistic expectations are conceptualized: generalized dispositional optimism might predict constructive responses to challenges, whereas relationship-specific optimism might predict poor coping mechanisms.

For instance, in a multi-method, longitudinal study of newly married couples, Neff and Geers (2013) found that individuals with higher dispositional optimism, (a stable tendency to expect good outcomes across important life domains (Scheier and Carver, 2018), engaged in more

positive problem-solving behaviours during high-conflict days and showed more constructive behaviours when discussing significant marital conflicts. Conversely, those with higher relationship-specific optimism engaged in fewer constructive problem-solving behaviours on high-conflict days exhibited worse behaviours during important marital conflicts and experienced steeper declines in marital well-being over time.

This suggests that while global forms of optimism can be beneficial for relationships and conflict management, specific forms of optimism might lead to negative outcomes. Empirical evidence from Icekson et al. (2020) found that high optimism can sometimes result in unrealistic expectations and overconfidence. This calls for regulation by traits like conscientiousness. In the context of higher education, this implies that university managers need to correctly evaluate conflict situations before choosing conflict management strategies. Recent studies on dispositional hope suggest that the absence of pessimism is more strongly related to positive psychological health outcomes than the presence of optimism (Scheier et al., 2021). This indicates that the strength of optimism in driving positive outcomes is relative, and the absence of pessimism is a better predictor of health outcomes.

However, Neff and Geers' (2013) findings contrast with those of Bandura (1994, 2010) and Fitzpatrick (2017), who view optimism as positive expectations that serve as a psychological resource, mediating negative effects and enabling individuals to maintain positivity in threatening situations like conflicts. Empirical studies have also found that increased optimism can act as a personal resource that buffers the daily negative spillover of interpersonal conflicts, depending on the conflict management strategy used (Martinez-Corts et al., 2015). Understanding optimism as a daily personal resource suggests that individuals must self-examine their conscience and discern whether their optimism is realistic or unrealistic to avoid setbacks.

Despite the strengths of optimism highlighted by various scholars, there is a paucity of research linking optimism to conflict management, particularly within the context of higher education. This section explored this area by reviewing studies conducted in higher education settings across the US, Europe, Asia, and Africa, identifying key findings and gaps. Notably, no such studies have been found specifically within Ugandan higher education.

Regarding faculty management, the literature suggests that optimism influences roles, relationships, and professional development, including role integration, teaching effectiveness, and community engagement (Li et al., 2023; Nagoji and Mackasare, 2023; Priyatama et al., 2018 and Zhanga et al., 2023). Analyses using structural equation modelling (SEM) consistently show a significant positive relationship between optimism and faculty engagement in higher education institutions. Both Nagoji and Mackasare (2023) and Li et al. (2023) found similar results, highlighting significant positive relationships between pay, performance, coworker support, individual optimism, and faculty engagement. Yet Priyatama et al. (2018) revealed a significant influence of perceived organizational support and optimism on lecturer engagement. These findings suggest that optimism, as a component of psychological capital, is essential for enhancing work engagement and improving educational institutions (Priyatama et al., 2018; Nagoji and Mackasare, 2023). Higher education institutions should emphasize academic achievement, driven by high but achievable goals, an orderly learning environment, and mutual respect between teachers and students.

In terms of student management, researchers have examined the role of optimism in students' academic and social integration and progress in problem-based learning environments. For example, Chrysikos et al. (2023) investigated low retention rates among first-year students at

a London university, while Zhao (2022) explored the relationships between loneliness, mindfulness, and optimism in self-directed learning. Yet Keshtvarz et al. (2022) predicted academic adjustment based on academic optimism and perceived self-efficacy. Using quantitative designs and multiple regression analyses, these studies found that academic optimism positively predicts academic adjustment (Keshtvarz et al., 2022) and that mindfulness and optimism are positively related to self-directed learning (Zhao, 2022). However, Chrysikos et al. (2023) noted that a significant number of students were pessimistic, with only 38 out of 109 participants being optimistic in their study. Pessimistic students often experience higher anxiety and stress, negatively impacting their sleep and retention (Chrysikos et al., 2023; Yuet et al., 2017).

Other studies have focused on the relationship between optimism and emotional health management in higher education. Scholars like Kapikiran and Acun-Kapikiran (2016) found a direct relationship between optimism, psychological resilience, and depressive symptoms, suggesting that optimists can overcome depressive triggers more easily than pessimists. Lucas et al. (2018) asserted that higher levels of hope and optimism are associated with reduced psychological distress. Conversely, Chen et al. (2019) found that optimism influences mental health and that cultural adaptability affects the impact of self-efficacy on depression and life satisfaction. Yet Foo and Prihadi (2021) argued that mattering, rather than optimism, is a stronger predictor of happiness, with optimism serving as a partial mediator. Additionally, Rosenstreich et al. (2015) found that enhanced hope and optimism reduce loneliness, particularly among vulnerable groups, and Alves et al. (2023) demonstrated that higher optimism reduces fear through decreased anxiety.

Some researchers have examined the impact of optimism on personality needs in higher education, focusing on social demographic factors, and emotional, and behavioural needs. Lucas et al. (2018) found that higher levels of hope and optimism influence attention to emotional information, with optimistic individuals spending less time on negative stimuli and more on positive information. Gender differences in optimism were also noted, with females generally being more optimistic than males (Maraş et al., 2022).

In African higher education, scholars have explored how optimism influences success-related variables. For instance, Odimegwu (2022) found no significant influence of optimism on social intelligence, while Azila-Gbettor, et al. (2022a) reported that optimism positively affects intellectual engagement and academic self-efficacy. Other Scholars, Abdel-Khalek (2019); Khalaf et al. (2013) and Murphy-Berman (1976) identified different predictors of optimism for men and women, suggesting the need for gender-specific approaches to fostering positive thinking.

In summary, the reviewed studies primarily involved university students and employed quantitative research designs, revealing a methodological gap. In my study, therefore, I adopted a qualitative design, targeting university deans at Makerere University, after all, scholars like Monehin and Diers-Lawson (2022) highlight the lack of evidence on optimism's application in senior-level leadership and conflict contexts. Additionally, most studies used theories such as the Goleman Model of Emotional and Social Intelligence, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and the Five Factor Model, without employing the psychological capital theory. My study aimed at bridging this theoretical gap and therefore, I adopted the psychological capital theory and used semi-structured interviews for data collection.

Lastly, existing studies have examined optimism in relation to various management aspects, but none have explored its relevance in conflict management in higher education and

specifically, Makerere University. For this study, I filled this gap by exploring how Makerere University academic deans utilize their psychological capital optimism in the management of conflict.

Research Approach

The qualitative approach aims to address societies' scientific and practical issues involving naturalistic and interpretive approaches to different subject matters (Aspers et al., 2019). For this study therefore, I adopted an interpretivism worldview (Creswell, 2003), as it aligns with a naturalistic, subjective, and qualitative paradigm. It recognizes individuals' efforts to understand their environment. Therefore, in this study, I employed a qualitative research approach. This approach was selected to explore and understand the perceptions and actual experiences shared by participants in their natural environment (Fouché et al., 2021). It was specifically chosen to comprehend the views of Makerere University deans on conflict management within their respective schools. This would not be achieved through any other approach like the quantitative approach which aids the testing of objective theories and examining the relationship among variables. Yet the mixed methods approach aids inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2018) which was not the purpose of this study. Additionally, this study focused on how psychological capital optimism influences university managers' decisions in conflict management, given their daily involvement in handling conflicts. This purpose would be best explained using the qualitative approach which would in turn also aid the developed a psychological strengths-driven framework to enhance the psychological capital of the deans for effective conflict management. Consequently, the qualitative approach facilitated my understanding of participants' experiences and opinions, considering their interaction processes, their work contexts (Makerere University), and their historical and cultural settings (Cresswell and Creswell, 2018). As well as supporting the mapping and development of the framework.

Research Design

The study design comprised two distinct phases, each building on the previous one, ultimately leading to the development of a framework aimed at enhancing the psychological capital of Makerere University academic deans as supported by Creswell (2018). I adopted the interpretive phenomenological research design for phase one of this study. This design allowed me to identify and understand the experiences of Makerere University deans (Alhazmi and Kaufmann, 2022). Further, the interpretive phenomenological research design enabled me to understand and describe the universal essence of utilizing psychological capital in conflict management phenomenon, while also keeping my preconceived assumptions about these phenomena (Smith and Osborn, 2015). This design also provided me with unique perspectives for developing a framework to understand and enhance the use of psychological capital in conflict management (Nashwa and Kinchin, 2023). It also offered me an opportunity to delve into the meanings that Makerere University academic deans attribute to the phenomena of conflict management in their schools (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) and their experiences and opinions on the utilization of psychological capital in managing conflicts (Creswell, 2018).

For phase two, I employed intervention mapping (IM), a framework commonly utilized in health promotion programs. This framework was utilized because issues of conflict management in higher education institutions like Makerere, are also concerned with both the psychological and physical health of not only the conflicting parties but also those supposed to manage them (Ronquillo et al., 2024). IM is a six-stage process that aids planners in creating evidence-based theories and frameworks, providing a structured approach to decision-making

at each step. It is crucial in planning and developing implementation strategies for program adoption, implementation, maintenance, and evaluation (Bartholomew-Eldredge et al., 2016). Using this framework, I utilized knowledge from literature and data-gathering activities from key stakeholders to develop, implement, and evaluate an intervention. Despite the Intervention Mapping framework having six steps, for this phase, I only focused on three steps.

Step 1: Conducting a Gap Assessment

During the first step of the intervention mapping, the intervention planner must complete several tasks as outlined by Oude-Hengel et al. (2014). These tasks include planning the gap assessment and assessing the physical environment. The intervention planner should also develop a gap assessment plan. At this step, I identified the purpose of the framework, determined the target population (Makerere University academic deans), selected appropriate methods and tools for data collection (interviews), and established a timeline for the assessment process. In the current study, I conducted the gap assessment through phase one of this study (Refer to section 3.3).

The specific details of findings of this gap assessment entailed facts about assessing the physical and behavioural determinants of Makerere University deans in the utilization of psychological capital; organisational factors of Makerere University and the existence of conflict management frameworks and their objectives. Interviews were conducted with the sitting Makerere University academic deans. In so doing, it came out clearly that Makerere University deans lacked a flexible psychological capital-based framework for enhancing their conflict management, yet they also highlighted deficits in conflict management skills and abilities as expressed in the results Chapters. To the deans, this framework would both guide the enhancement of their psychological capital and conflict management skills as well as address issues of Makerere University's organizational culture, and academic deans' personal factors like cultural, religious, education rank, gender, and policy alignment.

Step 2. Selecting Theory-Based Methods and Practical Strategies to Ensure That the Theory Speaks

This step involves selecting theory-based intervention methods that align with the determinants identified in the previous step 1. These determinants are the underlying factors contributing to the problem or issue being addressed (Oude-Hengel et al., 2014). To achieve this, I was guided by psychological capital theory-based interventions that could cause both psychological and management change. I translated these interventions into practical applications of the framework that is grounded in psychological capital constructs and management behaviour, with the potential to effectively bring about desired changes in conflict management outcomes (Oude-Hengel et al., 2014).

Step 3. Translating Methods and Strategies into an Organised Framework

This step involves translating the intervention methods and strategies developed with participants into an organized framework. It also focuses on developing a structured plan that outlines the implementation details of the intervention (Oude-Hengel et al., 2014). In the current study, I carried out all activities for phase two for intervention mapping, development, and validation. I also considered other organizational factors, cultural components, educational rank, and gender aspects that were found to interplay with policy components at Makerere University in Phase One of this study. Consequently, a carefully developed a psychological capital conflict management framework was created to enhance the use of psychological capital

strengths among Makerere University deans in managing conflicts. The process involved research and consensus-seeking processes to validate its relevance and credibility.

Study Population

The Makerere University academic deans were the parent population. These make a total of 28 schools based in 9 Colleges and 1 constituent School of Law. Academic deans were the targeted population for this research specifically due to their role in overseeing the an academic unit in higher institutions like Makerere University, yet they are also accountable for the overall supervision and administration of its affairs (Uganda Government, 2001). With such a mandate, they are better positioned to confront and manage both task and relationship-related conflicts in their schools.

Phase two of this study comprised two distinct stages—Stage 1 and Stage 2—in the ultimate development of the framework. Stage 1 involved the initial framework design one-on-one consensus review session, which included a one-on-one review and refinement sessions. Stage 2 was the validation pilot consensus group session. Both stages were consensus-seeking activities targeting both the 14 Makerere University deans who participated in phase One and the 14 who did not. These activities aimed to gather feedback and commentary on the validity and relevance of the design and development processes for the psychological capital conflict management framework. I sought the input and expertise of Makerere University deans, who are the framework's intended audience and practitioners in conflict management.

Phase one of this study established that Makerere University lacks a specific, psychological capital-driven framework for conflict management at both school and top management levels. Hence the need for this framework.

Sampling Strategies and Sample Size

Sampling of Schools

I used Biglan's classification of academic disciplines (Biglan, 1973a, 1973b) to purposively (Maree and Pietersen, 2016) select 14 schools from a total of 28 schools together with their respective deans. A list of colleges and schools in Makerere University was obtained from the human resource department office, which guided this sampling process. Two schools were selected in some of the colleges while for other colleges, one school was selected. This depended on the number of schools in the college and the length spent in office by the sitting dean. This is in line with the assertions of Kelly (2010) and Robinson (2014) that purposive sampling is used to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information; give different and important views about the ideas and issues in question and therefore need to be included in the sample. In acknowledgement of the potential research bias that would result from purposive choice of participants that depends on the researcher's subjective judgment. To limit this bias, I used an iterative approach to draw an appropriate sample (Maree and Pietersen, 2016).

The selected 14 schools constituted the sample for both phase one and stage 1 (Initial framework design one-on-one review activities) of phase 2 of this study. The other 14 schools were taken on for stage 2 (Pilot consensus group session) of phase two of this study. Below is a table of college classification as per Biglan:

Table 1: Clustering of Academic Task Areas in Three Dimensions, Biglan (1973)

Task Area	Hard		Soft	
	Non-Life System	Life System	Non-Life System	Life System
Pure	College of Natural Sciences (CONAS)	College of Health Sciences (CHS), College of Natural Sciences (CONAS), College of Veterinary Medicine, Animal Resources & Biosecurity (COVAB),	Schools of Law, College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS)	Schools of Law, College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS)
Applied	College of Computing and Information Systems (COCIS), College of Engineering, Design Art	College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES)	College of Business and Management Sciences (COBAMS)	College of Business and Management Sciences (COBAMS)

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the academic deans who participated in Phase One and Stage 1 of Phase Two of this study.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Employee Participants

Participant Identification	Age in yrs	Academic Rank	Designation	Gender
Dean A	45	Lecturer	Acting Dean	Male
Dean B	45-50	Professor	Dean	Male
Dean C	45-50	Senior Lecturer	Dean	Female
Dean D	45-50	Senior Lecturer	Dean	Male
Dean E	51-54	Professor	Dean	Male
Dean F	45-50	Senior Lecturer	Dean	Male
Dean G	52	Senior Lecturer	Dean	Female
Dean H	52	Lecturer	Dean	Female
Dean I	54	Senior Lecturer	Dean	Female
Dean J	41	Senior Lecturer	Dean	Female
Dean K	52	Lecturer	Dean	Male
Dean L	45-50	Lecturer	Dean	Male
Dean M	40-45	Lecturer	Dean	Male
Dean N	56	Associate Professor	Dean	Male

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Observations by scholars such as Bernard et al. (2016) identify three broad categories of methods used in qualitative inquiries to collect data on human thought and behaviour including indirect observation, direct observation, and elicitation or engaging in dialogue with people. This study utilized the elicitation category, and the following is a description of the techniques employed for the two data collection activities.

For Phase One data collection activity of this study, I employed semi-structured interviews, crafted in alignment with the objectives and research questions of my study. According to Ruslin et al. (2022), semi-structured interviews are particularly potent in qualitative research as they enable the researcher to gather comprehensive information and evidence from interviewees, capturing their perspectives from multiple angles. These interviews were predominantly conducted face-to-face in the deans' offices at their respective schools, using primarily interview guides with 16 open-ended questions.

The interview guide aided the collection of qualitative data from the university deans, allowing them to share their experiences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) regarding the types of conflicts they handle and their methods for managing these conflicts, which helped in exploring how they leverage psychological capital in conflict management. Additionally, the interview guide permitted deviations from the predetermined question sequence (Creswell and Plano-Clerk (2018), enabling me, as the interviewer, to pose supplementary questions for clarification or to probe further into participants' explanations and responses.

To accommodate the deans' demanding schedules and to remain flexible amidst frequent and sudden changes, the interviews were scheduled accordingly. Given the complexity of this study's focus, extra time was dedicated to explaining the concept of psychological capital to any deans who requested clarification. The interview sessions were digitally recorded to capture contextual nuances beyond the spoken words, gain insight into participants' perspectives, and obtain data that cannot be directly observed, with verbatim transcripts subsequently produced. Field notes were also compiled during the interviews to supplement the recorded data.

For Phase Two data collection activities, one-on-one consultation and discussion sessions were held with only 8 out of the 14 academic deans who participated in Phase One of the study. These sessions took place between June 10th, and 19th, 2024. During these sessions, initial design ideas for the intervention framework were shared. Since these deans had already signed the consent forms to participate in this study, they were not further asked to fill in more. They were asked either to supplement the recommendations they had given during Phase One, withdraw them or give specifically new ideas, submissions and suggestions for improving specific content inclusions in the psychological capital conflict management framework. Additionally, their feedback was solicited on structuring the validation pilot consensus group session. Later, a draft framework where the deans' suggestions were included, was shared through email, and subsequent one-on-one phone sessions were also conducted with the 8 deans to ensure all their ideas were incorporated into the draft framework. The profiles of the 8 deans involved in the Initial framework design one-on-one review session are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Profile of Participants for the Initial Framework Design One-on-One Review Session

Gender	Academic Rank
Male	Senior Lecturer
Female	Lecturer
Female	Senior Lecturer
Male	Senior Lecturer
Male	Professor
Male	Associate Professor
Male	Senior Lecturer
Male	Associate Professor

During the validation pilot consensus group session, input and comments from the Initial framework design one-on-one review session were integrated into the design and development ideas, followed by a validation pilot consensus group session. This virtual session included deans who had not participated in phase one of the initial review session. A consensus approach was employed to ensure that all participants' views were incorporated into the final framework intervention design.

The Validation pilot session was held on June 28th, 2024, where participants were asked to sign consent forms before the session. I facilitated the group discussion, which was organized into these sections: introduction, background of the study, presentation of findings from Phase One, presentation of the framework, and group discussion about the framework and way forward. After the discussion, I compiled detailed notes, and suggestions for improving content inclusions, structural elements, and activities outlined in the framework. These findings are discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5. A profile of the 5 deans who participated in the validation pilot group session is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: A Profile of the Participants Who Attended the Pilot Group Session

Gender	Designation
Male	Dean
Female	Dean
Female	Dean
Male	Dean
Female	Dean

Ethical Considerations

Adhering to national and international research ethical standards, including UNCST (2014, 2016) and Makerere University (2008), this study upheld a fundamental ethical framework based on principles of respecting human rights and avoiding harm. Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Makerere University School of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee and was granted, Ref. No: MAKSHSREC-2024-745. Other key ethical considerations included strategies to promote the involvement of relevant participant groups, ensuring informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, safeguarding anonymity, protecting human dignity, and preventing plagiarism. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and potential benefits, with assurances that participation would not result in harm.

Informed Consent

The primary ethical consideration for this study was obtaining informed consent from all participants (see Appendix A Consent Form for a sample of the form). Participants were

verbally informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage or choose not to participate. The consent form emphasized the participants' right to refuse participation and to withdraw at any time. Participants were also permitted to record interviews as explained in the consent forms, and all participants agreed to be audio-taped.

Confidentiality

As a researcher, maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, great care was taken to protect participants' privacy. No names were mentioned to prevent recognition. Before audio recording the interviews, the confidentiality clause was explained, assuring participants that confidentiality would always be maintained. At the start of all interviews, I informed all participants of the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Referral for further support was available if any participant displayed signs of emotional distress during the interviews.

Self-Reflexivity

According to Olmos-Vega et al. (2022), qualitative research relies on nuanced judgements that require researcher reflexivity, and hence define reflexivity as a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes. According to Willig (2013), the researcher influences the research process both as a person through personal reflexivity and as a theorist through epistemological reflexivity. Reflexivity allows the researcher to reflect on how their involvement in the research investigation influences the research and its findings. Since I adopted a phenomenological research design, my reflexivity process focused on interrogating how my subjectivity is present in the object, and how I, as the subject, and the object are enmeshed while at the same time understanding how my data interpretations and analyses came about, thus how I constructed knowledge (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). From a reflexive standpoint, the researcher must apply vigilance of self, which Carey (2012, p. 20) describes as recognizing one's own assumptions as potential sources of bias. Epistemological reflexivity involves the researcher's awareness of their theoretical framework and assumptions, and how these shape their understanding and interpretation of data. This reflexivity entails acknowledging the role of theory and knowledge paradigms in the research process.

Using a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of Makerere University deans in managing conflicts, epistemological reflexivity is required recognizing that this method emphasizes subjective experiences and that the choice of this method will shape the findings. I was reflexive about adopting psychological capital theory as a theoretical framework and its impact on the management strategies employed by the deans in managing conflicts.

As a researcher, I also consciously reflected on my role and how it affected the research process from the onset of the investigation and throughout the various stages of the research process and different data collection activities. I found it challenging to remain objective, mindful of my gender, cultural, and religious beliefs, and background, as well as my role as a manager in my own workplace and the fact that I encounter and manage conflicts regularly. Personal reflexivity involved acknowledging my cultural and religious biases and striving for a more objective perspective. Managing myself on this research journey required integrity, as I kept my promises to each participant, whether in group sessions or one-on-one interactions. I strived to be consistent in my thoughts and actions throughout this journey.

Pilot Testing

Scholars like Malmqvist et al. (2019) and Peterson (2023) assert that a carefully organized and managed pilot study has the potential to increase the quality of the research as results from such studies can inform subsequent parts of the research process. The purpose of pilot testing was to evaluate the clarity of the instrument's items, allowing for the modification or removal of any items that are found to be inadequate, thereby enhancing the quality of the research instrument and study outcomes (Malmqvist et al., 2019; Muresherwa and Loyiso, 2022). Consequently, a pilot study was conducted for this study to identify and address ambiguities or poorly worded items in the research instrument. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2013), about ten cases representing the target population in all major respects are sufficient for a pilot test. In that line, the pilot study involved 10 managers from organizations outside Makerere University. According to Malmqvist et al. (2019) still, a proper analysis of the procedures and results from the pilot study facilitates the identification of weaknesses that were addressed. Consequently, following the pilot test, the data were thoroughly reviewed to ensure consistency between the responses and the research questions. Results indicated that some three questions were repeated, while some managers indicated that the initial 21 questions were too many for the interview. Most managers felt that they had no time to attend to those questions. This review resulted in the elimination of five questions from the interview guide, leaving sixteen questions due to identified repetitions.

Bias Check and Control

In acknowledgement of the both the cultural and confirmation bias in data analysis and interpretation, I conducted an external peer review with experts from the University of Western Cape in South Africa to check whether my interpretations are accurate (Thirsk and Clark (2017).

3.0 FINDINGS

The findings of objective four delve into the utilization of optimism by Makerere University academic deans in conflict management, highlighting contrasting approaches among different groups of deans especially influenced by gender and cultural values. Two subthemes were stated in line with the psychological capital theory.

Unrealistic Psychological Capital Optimism

Individuals who fail to take charge and properly analyse situations, thus neglecting to distinguish between causes that are personal, permanent, or pervasive and those that can be externalized or downplayed as temporary or situation specific. Results from this study portray that some deans and exclusively male deans exhibited unrealistic optimism characterized by an unwavering belief in positive outcomes and a tendency to attribute success solely to themselves while avoiding accountability for failures. They demonstrated an inclination towards micromanagement and exertion of control over conflicts, often neglecting inclusivity and engagement of stakeholders in conflict resolution processes. Much as with this approach, these deans feel safe with no escalating conflicts, it may hinder their ability to recognize and capitalize on learning opportunities inherent in conflicts, potentially leading to missed chances for growth and strained relationships. It may also expose their schools to risks that come with improper assessment of risk factors. Dean N exemplifies this unrealistic optimism by emphasizing individual responsibility and maintaining a threat-free mindset, which could limit his effectiveness in collaborative conflict resolution. He stated this;

First, as I have told you, I came to this institution, and each one of us was called to serve, I do my part and you do your part. If you don't do your part, it's your responsibility, that is not mine, I will not take it personally. That's why I tend to have threat threat-free mindset, yes! I am always optimistic that positive results must come out. I have also a strong mind opinion as an individual and I will try to articulate and defend my opinion and I will go a distance up to where it can be taken or not. And I don't give up. Therefore, each one of us must take responsibility for our actions because that's it. It would be embarrassing for me to take an action and I expect someone else to take responsibility. At the university level, virtually, it's that each one is a leader in his own right, that's why when you go to teach you organize your work and go and teach. (January 25, 2024, Makerere).

Dean N, a male Mukiga scientist, embodies a steadfast belief in his optimistic explanatory style portrayed in the way he externalizes every conflict situation, and a strong commitment to individual responsibility, characteristics that are deeply rooted in his identity as a Mukiga and his background as a scientist. His Mukiga heritage likely contributes to his resilience and determination, while his scientific training reinforces his analytical mindset and problem-solving approach.

In line with Dean N's perspective, Makerere University deans who share his philosophy appear to prioritize personal accountability over collaborative interventions that engage all parties involved in a conflict. Rather than facilitating dialogues and inclusive processes, they tend to leave responsibility to individuals and trust in their ability to navigate conflicts independently. Such leaders tend to be rigid, exert control over themselves and others, externalizing any types of failure that may come by, and thus shirking responsibility, expecting success without considering the input or involvement of others. However, this optimism and individualistic approach may lead to some challenges, especially in conflict management scenarios. These may be in the form of missed opportunities for learning and growth, as well as potential strain on relationships due to a lack of inclusivity and collaboration in conflict resolution processes.

Flexible Psychological Capital Optimism

In flexible psychological capital optimism, the individual aims to accurately assess a situation and then decide when to use optimistic or pessimistic explanatory styles. Findings from this study indicate that another subgroup of deans, with a majority of females, showcased a pragmatic and adaptable optimism. They approach conflicts cautiously, acknowledge their complexities and uncertainties, and prioritize comprehensive evaluation before acting. These deans maintain a balanced perspective, avoiding extremes in both internalizing successes and attempting to micromanage conflicts. Dean J embodies this flexible optimism by advocating for proactive problem-solving grounded in a strong understanding of human behaviour and organizational dynamics. He explains that;

Never, a workplace, you know I am a proponent of positive psychology, but positive psychology exists because we want to solve problems positively; okay we want to avoid them. But there is no way you can avoid problems in your work situation. You see a workplace is even worse than a family. It is a place where people have invested interests and so many things and resources. And to make it worse, we are many people from different backgrounds. It's like from a marital status situation, issues that they have to hide, you only realize when one of them has committed suicide, or out of the blue one signs for divorce, and you say; even these we thought that they were role models! So, for me, I think that you can never avoid conflicts in the workplace. You can never have a conflict-free workplace. You can avoid conflict, but you can never have a conflict-free environment. They can only be minimized. So, for me, my thinking

is using our efforts to try to resolve issues as they emerge because there are underlying issues. So, if we can keep on identifying those underlying issues, we then can resolve conflicts. Sometimes signals come up and then we just ignore them, or we take it for granted that things will be sorted by themselves. But it seems we need to pay attention to even those minor things. (January 06,2024, Makerere).

Dean J, a psychologist, in his early forties, a proponent of positive psychology and an advocate for constructive problem-solving, offers invaluable insights into managing conflicts. Dean J's background as a psychologist and early supporter of positive psychology informs his pragmatic and effective approach to conflict resolution. His insights remind us that conflicts, while inevitable, can be managed with a blend of realism and optimism. His approach to conflict resolution is grounded in a nuanced understanding of human behaviour and organizational dynamics. In line with Dean J's utilization of flexible optimism, university deans need to recognize that university task-related, and relationship conflicts mainly arise from the diverse backgrounds of the faculty and vested interests of individuals in the workplace and therefore feel this spirit of entitlement. Some deans therefore view conflicts as opportunities for growth and improvement rather than as insurmountable obstacles and therefore employ proactive problem-solving strategies. They identify the underlying issues and address conflicts as they emerge, rather than ignoring or dismissing them. By paying attention to even the minor signals of potential conflicts, deans can prevent escalation and foster a culture of open communication and collaboration.

By embracing flexibility, thorough evaluation, and proactive problem-solving, organizations can navigate conflicts more effectively and foster a culture of resilience and growth. Dean J's wisdom serves as a beacon for leaders striving to create harmonious and productive work environments in the face of adversity.

In essence, this study reveals the importance of adopting a balanced and flexible approach to optimism in conflict management. While rigid optimism may lead to rigidity in conflict resolution approaches and a lack of inclusivity, flexible optimism allows for proactive problem-solving and the recognition of conflicts as opportunities for growth and improvement.

For Phase Two, findings from phase two of this study that was intended to inform the formulation of the psychological capital conflict management framework, designed to enhance the skills of Makerere University deans for effective management of conflict gave birth to three sub-themes including Capacity building, flexible and practical frameworks, and enhancement of organizational culture of Makerere University. These together with their corresponding activities were put together to form an intervention called the psychological capital conflict management framework. This framework also encompasses interventions that encompass the factors that interplay psychological capital in the management of conflict including gender, religion, academic rank, and cultural values. All these ideas were put together and presented to Makerere University deans in phase two, who suggested an implementation plan for the framework. This was finally inculcated into the draft framework to come up with a final version presented below.

Intervention Mapping, Development and Validation

Findings from phase two of this study indicate that the framework was to include all those strategies that deans thought would help them enhance their capability in the management of conflicts. Dean F for example, a Mukiga and scientist, critiqued the rigidity of existing University manuals, suggesting that effective conflict management models should emerge from practical experience and a profound psychological understanding. This viewpoint emphasized

the need for frameworks that are not only theoretically sound but also practically applicable in real-world scenarios.

This highlights a significant gap in the existing conflict management strategies, emphasizing that these manuals lack a basis in real-world experience and hence fail to address the practical realities of conflict. This criticism aligns closely with psychological capital theory, which posits that individuals' psychological resources—such as self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience—are crucial for effective conflict management. Several other deans felt the same, suggesting that current frameworks neglect the psychological dimensions of conflict, which are essential for fostering resilience and reducing the stress that comes with conflict management.

Furthermore, other deans who participated in phase two advocated for conflict management models that are derived from practical experience, believing that real-life conflict situations provide critical insights that can inform the development of more effective strategies. Such strategies should have clear guidelines and policies that can be easily understood and implemented. This highlights the importance of creating user-friendly frameworks that provide clear instructions and support for customization.

Dean B's extensive experience on the other hand, as a professor and scientist at Makerere University, positions him as a key voice in discussions about issues of organizational culture and conflict management. His middle-aged perspective brings a wealth of knowledge and understanding of the academic environment, highlighting the challenges and opportunities within the institution. As a leader, Dean B was acutely aware of the gaps in institutional support for developing essential leadership skills, particularly in conflict management.

He emphasized the need for the development of strategies that enhance the four constructs of psychological capital among deans, essential for effective leadership and conflict management. Together with this, he highlighted a lack of institutional support in cultivating these attributes among university leaders. This shortfall can severely impact leaders' effectiveness, their ability to navigate conflicts, and their overall contribution to a positive organizational culture. Other deans who participated in Stage 1 of the intervention mapping, advocated for a framework for enhancing Makerere University's organizational culture to include fostering an environment that promotes collaboration, communication, transparency, trust, and mutual respect. Needing interventions that show the deliberate efforts of the human resource department at Makerere University to skill university leaders in conflict management.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The fourth objective of this study explored how Makerere University academic deans use psychological capital optimism in conflict management, uncovering significant gender differences. Findings revealed that some male deans exhibited unrealistic optimism, characterized by an unwavering belief in positive outcomes and a tendency to avoid accountability, leading to micromanagement and lack of stakeholder engagement, thereby risking improper conflict assessment. In contrast, a subgroup of predominantly female deans displayed pragmatic and adaptable optimism, approaching conflicts with caution and balanced evaluation, promoting inclusive and proactive conflict management. The study concludes that gender issues, together with psychological capital have a bearing on the utilization of either flexible optimism or unrealistic optimism among Makerere University deans.

Recommendations

Recommendations on Practice

Findings from this study indicate that some deans fail to own failures and instead only own successes. In this study I therefore, recommend that Makerere University should establish a culture where deans are held accountable for both successes and failures, encouraging them to take ownership of outcomes and learn from conflicts. Adoption of flexible optimism among deans would be very crucial, where they evaluate conflicts thoroughly before adopting an optimistic or pessimistic stance.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research may point to exploring the distinction between realistic and unrealistic optimism and their impacts on conflict management.

Policy Implication and Recommendations

Makerere University policy should support training for realistic optimism such that deans develop the ability to accurately assess conflicts and make informed decisions that prevent overconfidence and unrealistic expectations. More still, the university management should develop inclusive conflict management policies that mandate inclusive and collaborative conflict resolution processes, ensuring that all stakeholders are engaged to mitigate the risks associated with micromanagement and unrealistic optimism by promoting a culture of shared responsibility and comprehensive evaluation. This study found that different genders utilize their optimism in conflict management differently and therefore recommends that the university should set up gender-specific professional development policies and programs that address the distinct ways male and female deans utilize their optimism to approach management conflict.

Recommendation for the Utilization of the Psychological Capital Conflict Management Framework

Based on the above findings analysed and interpreted in the previous Chapters, I recommend the Psychological Capital Conflict Management Framework (See Figure 1.2) designed to enhance the psychological capital of Makerere University deans for effective management of conflicts. This framework, based on psychological capital theory, provides comprehensive interventions, including capacity building, psychological and organizational culture development, policy review, and adaptability. It encourages a dynamic and proactive conflict management style. Focusing on hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, the framework supports conflict management and other functions, promoting continuous improvement as noted by Zou et al. (2015). If implemented effectively, this framework can enhance the psychological capital of Makerere University deans, leading to more efficient management of conflicts and a more productive academic environment.

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American Journal of Education and Practice
ISSN 2520-3991 (Online)
Vol.8, Issue 6, pp 1 – 27, 2024
www.ajpojournals.org

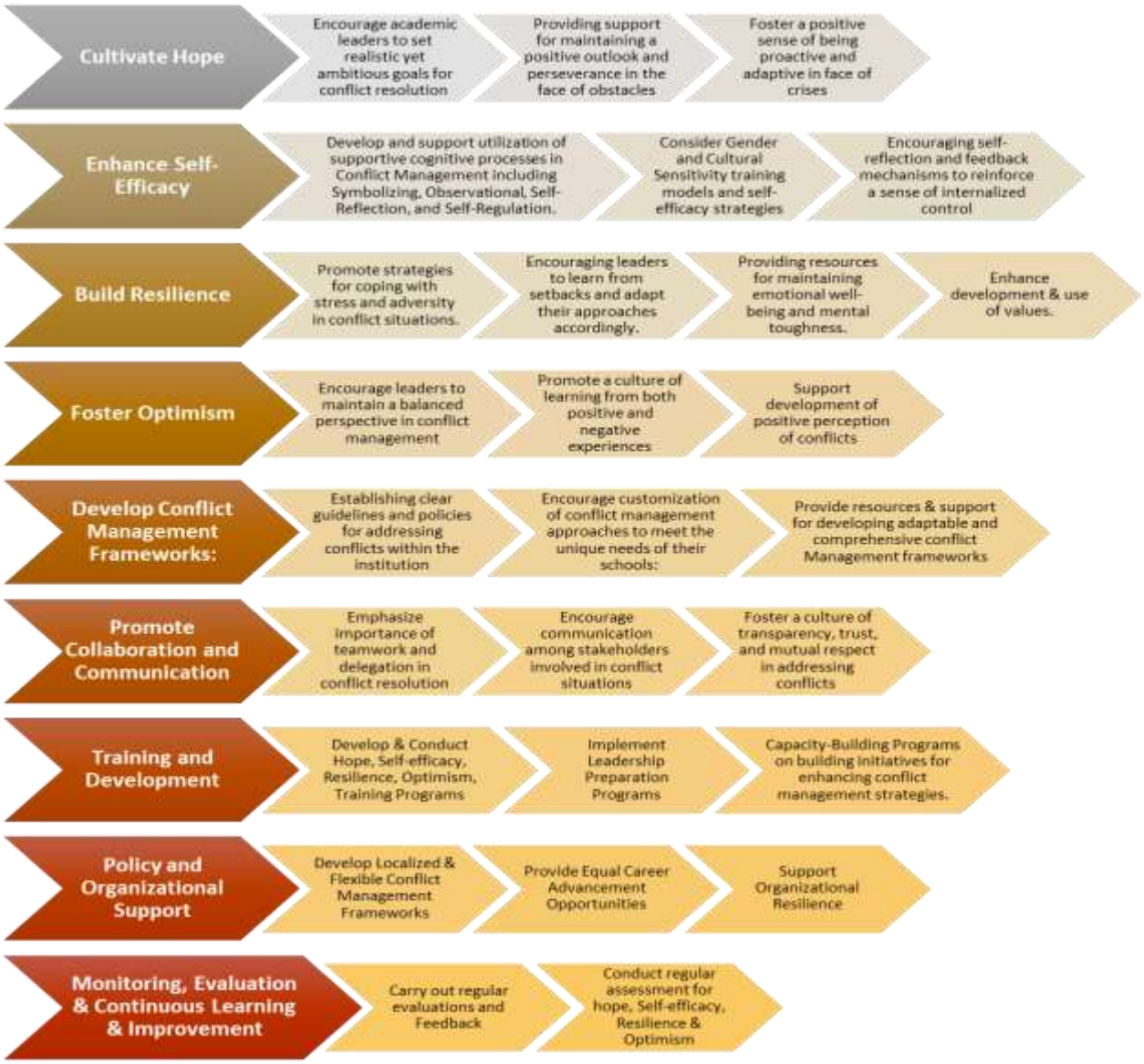

Figure 1: The Psychological Capital Conflict Management Framework

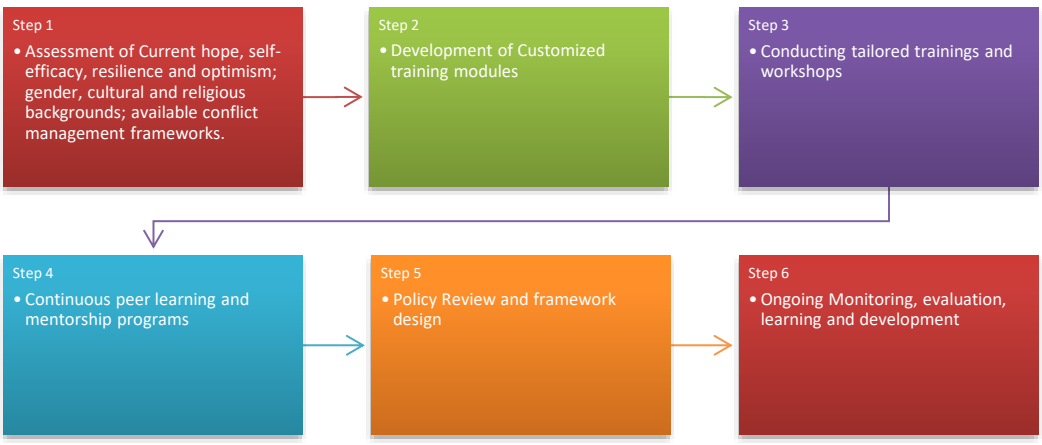

Figure 2: Psychological Capital Conflict Management Framework Implementation Plan

As described in Chapter 3, this framework was designed and developed after extensive engagement with various role-players and specifically Makerere University Deans. It encompasses a set of guidelines and a series of activities that Makerere University management can implement. This framework presents the first 4 slots for the enhancement of psychological capital, one slot focusing on the development of flexible conflict management frameworks, and four other slots focusing on the development of Makerere University's organizational culture. The framework presents six steps in the implementation plan of the framework including step 1: Initial assessment, Development of customized modules, Conducting of tailored pieces of training, Conducting policy review and framework design, and Ongoing monitoring, learning and development.

Limitations

The study on the utilization of psychological capital optimism by academic deans at Makerere University in managing conflicts had several potential limitations: First, the findings are based on a specific group of academic deans at Makerere University, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other universities or contexts. A larger and more diverse sample might provide more generalizable insights. In addition, the female deans had the least representation due to their unavailability for several reasons beyond the researchers' abilities. This may indicate a gender bias. The reliance on self-reported data from deans about their psychological capital optimism and conflict management strategies could introduce bias. Deans might have overestimated their positive attributes or downplayed their shortcomings. Further, the study is conducted within the specific cultural and organizational context of Makerere University. Cultural factors unique to this setting may influence the findings, and these factors might not be present or relevant in other institutions. In addition, the study highlights gender and religious differences in the utilization of psychological capital optimism. However, these differences could be influenced by underlying biases or social expectations, which may not have been fully explored or accounted for. Addressing these limitations in future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding and find relationships in the role of psychological capital in conflict management within academic institutions.

Acknowledgement

The journey to earning a PhD is incredibly challenging and draining both physically and emotionally. However, the support of significant others acts as a crucial buffer during such times. They offer wisdom about the opportunities that success can bring and teach us how to overcome obstacles when we feel overwhelmed. I am forever grateful for the lessons, prayers, emotional support, and especially the wisdom extended to me throughout this process. The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the strength and grace provided by all of you, particularly the following individuals.

First, I thank God, who granted me the grace to embark on this PhD journey and saw me through to the end. I praise you, Lord!

Words cannot adequately express my gratitude to my family, especially my better half, Dr. Anthony Kkonde, and my children: Frank Kiggundu, Henry Lukwago, Peter Claver Ssekitooleko, Harvey Simon Ssentongo, Jude Casper Tamale, and Anthony M.Z. Lule. Your prayers, and moral, and emotional support have been instrumental in reaching this milestone. I also thank my other family members, including Florence Nakayiira, Lucia Kivumbi, and Judith Katongole, for their patience with my absence from home and work. May God bless you all.

Professor Joseph Kimoga and Dr. Gerald Bwenvu, thank you for being my supervisors, supporters, and mentors. Your encouragement to seize every opportunity, understanding, patience, teachings, kindness, and flexibility have been invaluable. Your interesting supervision sessions made the challenging times easier. Thank you for being role models and pushing me out of my comfort zone whenever I felt like giving up.

Members of my Doctoral committee including Professor S.K Bakkabulindi, Dr. Najjuma, and Professor Ezat I will be grateful forever for all the support you have extended to me since I joined the PhD program to date, but specifically for constructively reading every part of my work.

Professor Nicollet Roman, I am deeply grateful!

Professor J.C. Maviiri and Sr. Dr. Nantamu, thank you for being available when I needed your expert support, for reading my drafts, and for providing valuable input.

Dr. Baluku, I cannot thank you enough. You were the first person to help me shape my research question and study purpose. With your guidance, everything seemed manageable, and here I am today! May God bless you.

To my classmates, I am so grateful for your patience with me. Though I was not originally from academia, you humbly helped me fit in. Edward Kamaga, Karenzi Gerald, and others thank you for sharing in my fears, tears, laughter, frustration, proud moments, confusion, and accomplishments. Your encouragement, calmness, empathy, patience, and kindness allowed me not only to persevere but also to reach greater heights.

To my teachers, thank you for your understanding and for providing the feedback that pushed me higher, even when I questioned every move. To the support staff, including Ms. Scovia Ssekweyama, Ms Sarah Nassuuna and Regina, I appreciate all the support you extended to me. I can only say—thank you!

To the college principals and deans at Makerere University, thank you for permitting me to collect data from your schools and for participating in my study. Your responsiveness and support were crucial throughout this journey.

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