



Religion – related discrimination and interpersonal conflict as impediments to employees' performance in selected universities in South-South, Nigeria

ODOGWU, Joseph Ebareotu & NNONYELU, Au. Nkemdili

Department of Sociology & Anthropology,

Faculty of Social Sciences, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

Email: odojossy@gmail.com; Emailaunnonyelu@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Nigeria is a nation with an extensive history of rivalries and tensions exacerbated by religious identities and diversities. Expectedly, these tensions have infiltrated workplaces, thereby replicating the cleavages, discriminatory practices and interpersonal conflicts prevalent in the wider society with attendant negative consequences on individual and organisational outcomes. As a result, this study tried to examine how religion – related discrimination and interpersonal conflict impedes employees' performance in selected universities in south – south, Nigeria. The cross – sectional survey design was adopted. The study participants (n=879) comprising academic and non-academic staff were chosen from four universities in the south-south region through the multi stage sampling technique. The structured questionnaire schedule was used for the data collection. The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of Software for Statistics and Data Science (STATA 13.0). The findings indicated that religion – related discrimination ($F=1, 877 = 109.48$; Prob. $> F = 0.0000 < 0.05$) and interpersonal conflict ($F=1, 877 = 566.03$; Prob. $> F = 0.0000 < 0.05$) have the potential to inhibit employees' performance in the selected universities. In addition, the t-values of religious discrimination ($t= 10.46$; $P>/t/ = 0.0000 < 0.005$) and religion – related interpersonal conflicts ($t= 23.79$; $P>/t/ = 0.0000 < 0.005$) showed that both variables were negatively correlated with employees' performance. The study concluded that the presence and expression of different religious identities in workplaces can fuel religion – related discrimination and interpersonal conflict, which can contribute to performance deficits among employees. Thus, there is need for Government and managements to formulate strategies, policies and interventions aimed at ensuring that employees are fairly treated, and that religious freedom does not translate to acrimony and enmity in the workplace.

Keywords: Religion - Related Discrimination; Interpersonal Conflicts; Employees' Performance; Universities; South-South; Identities; Cleavages

JEL Classification: Z13; Z19

Introduction

Religion is not only manifest but well expressed in both public and private spheres in Nigeria. It is well advocated and practiced out of context, resulting in various intra-group and inter-group rivalries over positions, resources and privileges. In fact, Nigeria is



synonymous with profound divisions which stimulate issues to be enthusiastically and aggressively contested along lines of regional, ethnic and religious identities. Religion remains one of the major sources of social identification in Nigeria. Like other African countries, Nigeria is one of the most religiously diversified with three major religious identities: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR) (Okpanachi, 2010; Pew, 2010). These religious cum ethnic identities have continued to fuel disparity, discrimination and relational conflict within and outside work organisations in Nigeria. To a large extent, this delineation underlies the North – South cleavage, however, even within the main Christian and Muslim categories, there are many sub-cleavages and inter-group contestations predicated on symbolic threats, subordination, domination and negative stereotypes with far-reaching consequences on employment relationship and work outcomes. This is because religious orientations create certain stereotypes and discriminatory practices (Isaiah, Ojaibo & Alagah, 2017; Aidoo, 2014; Gebert, Kearney, King, Zhang & Song 2014; Vrska, 2013; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 2011; Vickers, 2015), which militate against religious minorities or other religious groups and this can provoke conflict situations that hampers performance at work if not well managed.

It is imperative to state that certain group of employees in Nigerian organisations tend to be discriminated against because of their religious affinities. In fact, most employment issues are shaped by appeasement to religious motives and instrumentalised religiosity results in ethnocentric inclinations and identity myopia at work which engender other organisational vulnerabilities (Jafari, Dedeoglu, Regany, Ustundagli and Batat, 2015; Yoshino and Smith, 2014; Rosh and Offermann, 2013). The implication is that certain employees or group of employees may be subjected to differential treatment based on their religious affiliation especially in public organisations in Nigeria where there seems to be a fierce contest between the two major religions – Christianity and Islam. There are reported cases of unfair treatment in areas such as promotion, remuneration, training and development, dismissal, transfer, compensation and a host of others because of their religious inclination. Consequently, when an employee is harassed or discriminated due



to his or her religious leaning, it may result in decreased morale, resentment and frustration which are detrimental to performance.

Previous studies have shown that tensions between religion and work can negatively affect employees' performance by promoting religion – related discrimination and interpersonal/relational conflicts (Domke, 2004; King, Stewart and Mckay, 2010; Exline & Bright, 2011; Petriglieri, 2011; Vrska, 2013; Aidoo, 2014; Messarra, 2014). For example, Messarra (2014) study showed that employees working in religiously diverse organisations were prone to interpersonal conflicts and misunderstanding, which result from diverse religious identities and activities. Such interpersonal conflicts and discrimination can lower the morale and productive capacities of employees, deflect team work and partnership, inhibit psychological wellbeing, and increase hostile behaviours with detrimental effects on performance.

Arguably, workplaces particularly in Nigeria can be described as melting pots because of the avalanche of people with different religious backgrounds, orientations, proclivities and idiosyncrasies. The existence of disparate religious identities has the potential to provoke discrimination and interpersonal/relational conflicts among employees of different faith bodies, resulting in performance deficits. Since most Nigerian universities are multi – religious in nature, it would be apt to critically interrogate how religion – related discrimination and interpersonal conflict impede employees' performance in selected universities in South-South, Nigeria. Important also is the need to suggest measures or strategies aimed at minimizing religion – related discrimination and interpersonal conflict, thereby harnessing religious diversity for increased performance in universities in south – south, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Religious Discrimination: Discrimination refers to the unfair and unwarranted treatment of individual or different groups of people, particularly on the grounds of race, gender, age, disability or religion (EEOC, 2010). Religious discrimination therefore means



treating a person or group disparately because of their membership in a particular religion or their beliefs about such religion. In contemporary work organisations, the pervasiveness of religion-related discrimination cannot be over-emphasised as most employees are treated unfavourably because of their religious identities, beliefs and practices. Perceptions of discrimination can affect critical areas such as employee relations, reward and benefits, promotion, etc.

Religion-Related Interpersonal Conflicts: Interpersonal conflicts are dyadic in nature because they involve two or more persons. It arises when an individual or a group of persons directly or indirectly hampers others from realizing a goal. In the context of work, interpersonal conflict denotes a situation in which an employee or group of employees frustrate attempts by another employee to achieve both personal and organisational goals and the prompt completion of assigned tasks. In some cases, underlying value systems such as variations in religious beliefs can fuel interpersonal conflicts among employees. According to Petriglieri (2011), the accommodation and expression of salient religious identities in the workplace can generate tensions of monumental dimensions. Religion – related interpersonal conflicts simply means conflict orchestrated by differences in opinions, values, ideas, as well as beliefs and practices about religion at work. Interpersonal conflicts fuelled by religious salience or identities are usually problematic, given the absolutist outlooks which they are embedded. Although, devotion to belief systems can facilitate the development of cohesion and sense of belonging, they can effortlessly activate bigotry, discrimination and weaken relationships at work.

Empirical Studies on Perceptions of Religious Discrimination on Employees' Performance

Isaiah et al. (2017) undertook a study to empirically test the relationship between workplace discrimination and employee performance in the Nigerian Food and Beverage sector in Rivers state. The cross – sectional survey design was employed. The purposive sampling technique was used to select five (5) firms for the study. A sample of 182 obtained through the Taro Yamane Formula was used. The structured questionnaire was used as the instrument of data collection. Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient was utilized in analysing the data. The study used efficiency and quality of work output

as measures of employee performance. The results indicated negative relationship between religious discrimination and quality of work output ($\rho = -0.398, p = 0.000$) and between religious discrimination and efficiency ($\rho = -0.0034, p = 0.000$). Also, a study was carried out by Messarra (2014) to examine how perceived religious discrimination negatively affect employees' commitment and engagement, resulting in poor performance and decreased productivity. The study surveyed ($n = 548$) employees from 9 organizations from different industries within the Lebanese private sector. The study utilized purposive sampling technique. The findings suggested that when workers perceive religious discrimination in their organization, their commitment and engagement were affected as shown in the results for religious affiliation and affective commitment ($F=4.117; P<0.000$), religious affiliation and normative commitment ($F=4.004; P=0.000$); religious affiliation and continuance commitment ($F=4.245; P>0.000$); religious affiliation and vigor ($F=4.467; P<0.000$); religious affiliation and absorption ($F=3.83; P<0.000$); as well as religious affiliation and dedication ($F=4.75; P<0.000$).

Effects of Religion – Related Interpersonal Conflicts on Performance Deficits among Employees

A study was carried out by Aidoo (2014) to examine the effects of religiosity and spirituality on human resources practices using selected institutions at Mankranso in Ahafo-Ano South District, Ghana. Close-ended questionnaire was used to gather data in the study. Descriptive research design was used and the questionnaire schedule was used to collect data from 221 respondents. The collected data was analysed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) while SPSS was used to manage the data. The study result showed that difference in religious belief and practices spurred interpersonal/relational conflicts among employees which negatively affected their job performance as indicated in ($r = 0.366, P > 0.001$).

Theoretical Framework

The Social Identity Theory undergirds this study. Social Identity Theory (SIT) was formulated and popularised by Henri Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel and Turner (1979). A key



assumption of SIT is that individuals are intrinsically motivated to achieve positive distinctiveness in a group setting. The emotional investments people make in their group membership result in their self-esteem being tied to the social standing of their in-group. Thus, SIT focuses on how individuals come to see themselves as members of one group (in-group/endogroup) in comparison with another group (out-group/exogroup) and the implications or consequences of this categorisation on the interactive process. Within the context of this work, religion – related discrimination and interpersonal conflict in workplaces can trigger social and psychological processes that directly or indirectly inhibit employees' performance especially in a multi – religious nation like Nigeria. The implication is that religious identities can create certain stereotypes, othering and discriminatory practices in areas such as promotion, appointment, discipline, reward and compensation, training and development opportunities etc. Such discrimination especially as it relates to religious orientations are capable of provoking relational conflict, resentment and disillusionment that may contribute to performance deficits in workplaces if not well managed.

Materials and Methods

The study used the cross-sectional design which enabled the researcher to obtain the requisite data from the selected participants at one point in time. The study was conducted using universities in the South – South region of Nigeria and was targeted at both academic and non-academic staff. There are a total of nineteen (19) universities in the region comprising 12 public and 7 private universities. The population of the study was made up of approximately forty-five thousand, five hundred and eighteen (45,518) comprising 13,685 academic and 31,833 non-academic staff respectively. However, this study used four universities i.e. one from each cadre (federal, state, private and private faith-based) in the South-South region. The population estimates for these universities were: Federal University, Otuoke (FUO) (743), Delta State University, Abraka (DELSU) (2,229), Novena University, Ogume (NUO) (406), and Benson Idahosa University, Benin City (BIU) (733). Thus, the target population of this study was 4,111 comprised of academic and non – academic staff in the selected universities. The sample for this study

was (n=879) encompassing both academic and non-academic staff of the selected public and private universities in South-South Nigeria.

The multistage sampling technique comprising stratified, simple random and proportionate sampling techniques was utilized. The structured questionnaire was used in the collection of data. The questionnaire consisted of closed – ended questions designed with the blend of Likert scale and nominal items. The study made use of self-administered questionnaire and was administered uniformly to all the study participants. In this study, the Software for Statistics and Data Science (STATA 13.0) was used to process and manage the data. The data obtained from the field survey were analyzed via descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

Findings /Results

Table 1: Responses on the most prevalent religious practices in Nigerian Universities

in South-South, Nigeria				
S/N	Items	Mean	Std. Dev	Obs.
1	Praying before the commencement of work/devotion	3.8806	1.5636	879
2	Wearing of religious attires to work	2.8112	1.5753	879
3	Reading of sacred texts, books etc. at work	3.3845	1.6058	879
4	Decorating office spaces with religious emblems, calendars etc.	3.4822	1.7022	879
5	Anointing offices daily with blessed water and oil	3.4153	1.8179	879
6	Proselytising or evangelizing others at work	3.2947	1.7158	879
7	Attending religious functions such as annual thanksgiving	3.4107	1.6694	879
Grand Mean		3.3827	1.6643	

Table 1 shows the scope of prevalent religious practices in universities in South-South Nigeria, suggesting that the ivory towers are not insulated from religious activities.

Perception of Religion – Related Discrimination and Employees’ Performance in Universities in South-South, Nigeria

Most of the respondents (n=525, 54%) were of the view that perception of religious discrimination negatively affects employees’ performance while others (n=354, 46%) disagreed. Fig 1 below shades more light to the respondents’ position on the issue.

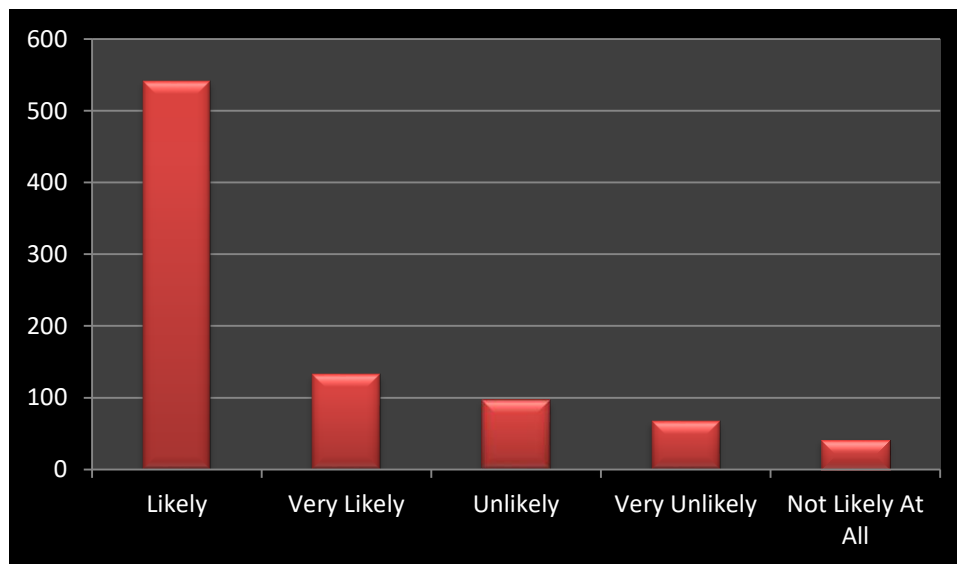


Fig 1: Bar chart showing respondents’ views on how perceptions of religious discrimination affect their performance

Religion – Related Interpersonal Conflicts and Employees’ Performance in Universities in South-South, Nigeria

A higher proportion of the study participants (n=658, 74.8%) believed that interpersonal or relational conflict engendered by the activities of different religious groups resulting from dissimilarities in underlying religious orientations, identities, and values can lead to performance deficit. Fig 2 below further illustrates respondents’ views on whether religion – related interpersonal conflict impede employees’ performance in universities in south – south, Nigeria.

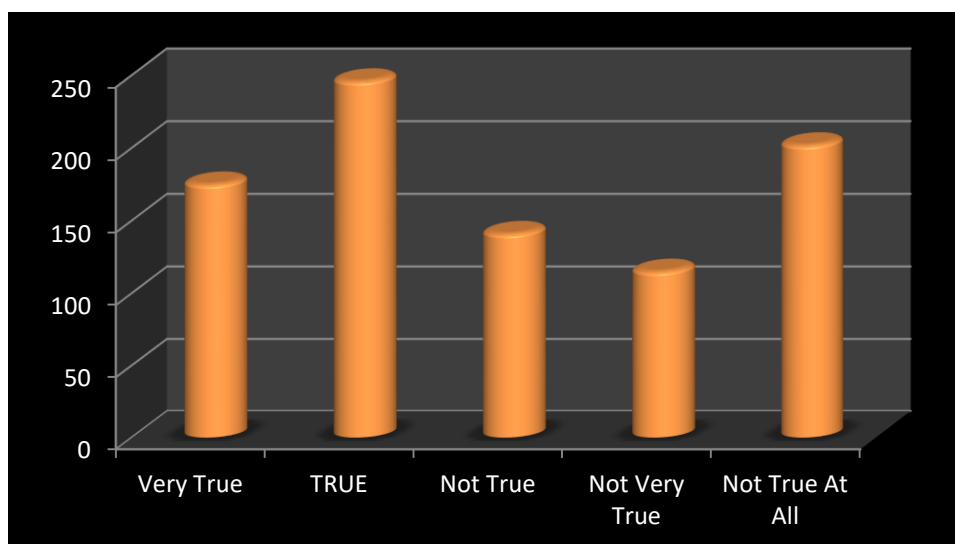


Fig.2: Cone showing respondents' views on how religion – related interpersonal conflict impede employees' performance in universities in south – south, Nigeria.

Hypotheses

Test of hypothesis 1 The f-ratio indicates that employees' perception of religious discrimination ($F=1, 877 = 109.48$; $Prob. > F = 0.0000 < 0.05$) significantly affects employees' performance. Besides, the t-value of employees' perception of religious discrimination ($t= 10.46$; $P>/t/ = 0.0000 < 0.005$) showed that there is significant relationship between employees' perception of religious discrimination and their performance in universities in South – South, Nigeria. See table2.

Table 2: Regression result for perceptions of religious discrimination and employees' performance

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs = 879		
Model	93.0012185	1	93.0012185	F(1, 877) = 109.48		
Residual	745.019946	877	.849509631	Prob > F = 0.0000		
Total	838.021165	878	.954466019	R-squared = 0.1110		
				Adj R-squared = 0.1100		
				Root MSE = .92169		

MHRBPIEP	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
EEPRDWP	.5700421	.0544812	10.46	0.000	.4631133	.6769709
_cons	2.52456	.1635206	15.44	0.000	2.203622	2.845497



Test of hypothesis 2: *The* f-ratio ($F=1, 877 = 566.03$; Prob. $> F = 0.0000 < 0.05$) implies that religion – related interpersonal conflicts significantly impede employees’ performance. Besides, the t-value of religion – related interpersonal conflicts ($t= 23.79$; $P>/t/ = 0.0000 < 0.005$) shows that there is significant relationship between religion – related interpersonal conflicts and employees’ performance in universities in South – South, Nigeria.

Table 3: Regression result for religion - related interpersonal conflicts and employees’ performance

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs = 879		
Model	328.714215	1	328.714215	F(1, 877) = 566.03		
Residual	509.306949	877	.580737685	Prob > F = 0.0000		
Total	838.021165	878	.954466019	R-squared = 0.3923		
				Adj R-squared = 0.3916		
				Root MSE = .76206		

MHRBPIEP	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
EIPCAADRGE	.6067249	.0255019	23.79	0.000	.556673	.6567768
_cons	2.236555	.0866099	25.82	0.000	2.066568	2.406541

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that religion has become a potent source of workplace politics and discrimination and perceptions of religious discrimination have a significant negative effect on employees’ performance in universities in South – South, Nigeria. This finding is corroborated by previous studies. For instance, in a study conducted in Nigeria by Isaiah et al. (2017), the result indicated a negative relationship between religious discrimination and quality of work output ($\rho = -0.398, p= 0.000$) and between religious discrimination and efficiency ($\rho = -0.0034, p. = 0.000$). This means that employees who are discriminated against owing to their religious beliefs and practices record low quality of work output and decrease in efficiency with detrimental effect on performance. Similarly, Messera (2014) argued that employees who perceive religious discrimination may show



decreased work performance and overall productivity. This is because employees that experience discrimination might become less emotionally attached, even disloyal to their organization and rather become more attached to their religious groups for support.

Also, the study provides evidence that the activities of different faith bodies can engender interpersonal or relational conflicts among employees in universities in South – South, Nigeria with attendant negative effect on their performance. This is because religion does not only affect the values of employees but also their lifestyles. Such variations can put employees with dissimilar religious philosophies at odd with each other. It can spur conflict relating to assigned duties, attires, and work scheduling as employees battle to respect their attachment and loyalty to their faiths. This finding is in agreement with the work of Aidoo (2014) who reported that difference in religion can generate interpersonal or relational conflicts among employees which negatively affects their job performance ($r = 0.366, P > 0.001$). Furthermore, Messarra (2014) study showed that employees working in religiously diverse organisations might be prone to interpersonal conflicts and misunderstanding due to diverse religious identities and activities which may result in negative personal and organizational consequences such as reduced performance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The visible differentiation of people based on their group membership tends to generate in – group favouritism or out – group bias. This is because the group which people identifies with is a major source of their identity and symbolic motives underlie intergroup attitudes and behaviours and account for the tendency to favour one’s group since it serves and secures its members’ sense of identity. Such intergroup bias can result in negative discriminatory outcomes and generate interpersonal conflicts at work with overwhelming harmful outcomes for both an individual employee and the organisation at large. The study has demonstrated that religion has the potential to fuel discrimination and interpersonal or relational conflicts in workplaces, resulting in performance deficits. Stories are rife in Nigerian universities where religious misunderstanding, disagreements and clashes have led to bodily harm, and in some cases, deaths to the



combatants. This obviously will affect the performance of those who see themselves as victims owing to their professed religious affiliations and inclinations.

Consequently, the study recommended that Government and managements formulate strategies, policies and interventions to ensure that no employee is discriminated based on his/her religious orientation in areas such as promotions, training and development, rewards, punishments, appointment etc. This is important because it would help in stimulating an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence which is essential for improved performance in the workplace. Furthermore, since the activities of different religious groups can lead to performance deficit, there is need for managements to constantly appraise and refine policies for different religious practices at work. There is also need for setting up an Inter-Faith Council (IFC) of religious groups' leaders aimed at harnessing their positions and roles to help organize their members not only for effective performance but also for prompt resolution of religion - related conflicts in their respective workplaces.

References

- Aidoo, T. S. (2014). *Assessing the effects of religiosity and spirituality on HR Practices at the workplace: A case of selected institutions at Mankranso in the Ahafo Ano South District.* A thesis submitted to the Department of Managerial Science, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Business Administration
- Domke, D. (2004). *God willing? Political fundamentalism in the White House, the 'war on terror,' and the echoing press.* London: Pluto Press.
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2010). *EEOC v. JBS USA, LLC d/b/a JBS Swift & Company, 8:10-cv-00318-TDT(D.Neb.* Available at: <http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/newsroom/release/8-31-10.cfm>. (Accessed 10 July 2017).
- Exline, J.J. & Bright, D.S. (2011). Spiritual and religious struggles in the workplace. *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 8(2), 123-142



- Gebert, D., Boerner, S., Kearney, E. King, J.E., Zhang, K. and Song, L. (2014). Expressing religious identities in the workplace: Analyzing a neglected diversity dimension. *Ersch in: Human Relations*, 67(5), 544-563
- Isaiah, D. Ojaibo, U. & Alagah, D.A. (2017). Workplace discrimination and employee Performance in Nigerian food and beverage sector. *International Journal of Advanced Academic Research Social & Management Sciences*, 3(11), 61-85
- Jafari, A., Dedeoglu, A. O., Regany, F., Ustundagli, E. & Batat, W. (2015). Rethinking religion in the context of ethnicity and well-being. *Marketing Theory*, 15(2):287-295
- King, J. E., Stewart, M. M & McKay, P.M. (2010) Religiosity, religious identity, and bias towards workplace others. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, August.
- Messarra, L.C. (2014). Religious diversity at work: The perceptual effects of religious discrimination on employee engagement and commitment. *Contemporary Management Research*, 10(1): 59-80
- Okpanachi, E. (2010). *Ethno-religious identity and conflict in Northern Nigeria*. IFRA (Institut de Recherche francais en Afrique) e-papers
- Petriglieri, J. L. (2011). Under threat: Responses to and the consequences of threats to individual identities. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(4): 641–662.
- Pew (2010). *Tolerance and tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Accessed 14/8/2019 from <http://www.pewforum.org/files2010/04/sub-saharan-africa-appendix-b.pdf>>
- Rosh, L. & Offermann, L. (2013). Be yourself, but carefully, Harvard Business Review, October, <http://hbr.org/2013/10/be-yourself-but-carefully/ar/1>
- Tajfel, H. (1978). The achievement of inter-group differentiation. In H. Tajfel (Ed.). *Differentiation between social groups* (pp.77-100). London: Academic Press.
- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.). *The social psychology of intergroup relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Vickers, L. (2015). Religion and the workplace. *The Equal Rights Review*, 14:106-118
- Vrška, J. (2013). *Cross-cultural analysis: Religion in the workplace in the USA and the Czech Republic*. Unpublished Thesis Submitted to Tomas Bata University, Zlin. Available at http://digilib.k.utb.cz/bitstream/handle/10563/20887/vr%C5%A1ka_2013_bp.pdf?sequence=1
- Yoshino, K. & Smith, C. (2014). Fear of being different stifles talent, Harvard Business Review, <http://hbr.org/2014/03/fear-of-being-different-stifles-talent/ar/1>