

# High-Power Distance Culture & Challenges of Corporate Governance: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Nigeria's Experience

## *Abstract*

Corporate governance (CG) has matured over the course of many years since inception – covering definitions, evolving nature, theories, fundamentals and principles among other components that are helping to enrich the discipline. Following Caren Legge's call to expand the topology of social science studies – to be multidisciplinary and less prescriptive, this current research aims to continue this enrichment process of CG by incorporating the interface of cultural context. By incorporating high power distance (HPD) – the prevailing, dominant cultural context in most developing countries such as Nigeria – the context of this study, we propose that HPD index has a negative implication on stakeholder's ability to challenge corporate mal (practices) including lack of transparency, accountability, autonomy, ethics, integrity and stakeholder's engagement, which are the core of CG principles. To empirically support this contention, the study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) of interview data drawn from 29 managerial and non-managerial staff across 2 Nigerian banking and petroleum firms. The findings and scope for further research will be presented following analysis of the empirical data.

**Keywords:** Corporate governance principles, cultural context, power distance, Nigeria.

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## **Introduction**

Corporate governance is a topic that is increasingly generating contentious debate among stakeholders (academics, scholars, practitioners, communities, employers and employees). As a field of study, corporate governance has matured over the course of many years since inception and is continuing to undergo further enrichment process. Many studies have captured the concept from the prisms of its definitions, evolving nature, theories, fundamentals and principles among other components that have been covered in enriching the discipline. According to Council (2007), corporate governance concept describes the "*framework of rules, relationships, systems and processes within and by which authority is exercised and controlled in corporations*". For Clark (2004, corporate governance encapsulates mechanics used to hold to account corporate actions and those in control of such activities. As Bhagat and Bolton (2008) noted, it is the mechanics of corporate governance that drives how organisational goals are set and pursued as well as how risks are monitored, assessed and performance maximised. According to Solomon (2007), a corporate governance can be viewed to be effective where its

structures encourage value creation, innovation, entrepreneurship, development, exploration, transparency and stakeholder's accountability – to mention few.

Central to corporate governance is essentially its guiding principles. One of these principles centre on the roles of the board and senior executives – relative to their skills, experience, autonomy and the nature and extent to which the organisation can operate (Clark, 2004; Bhagat and Bolton, 2008). 2. Another component of the principles is the basic need for integrity among those who can influence the organisations' strategy and economic performance, with specific focus on (legal as well as) ethical approach to decision making and stakeholder's interest (Council, 2007). 3. Also paramount to the principle is the ability to provide needed information to investment community, which is essential for attracting capital and ensuring accountability. 4. Disclosing organisational financial and non-financial activities require mechanics that safeguards the integrity of organisation's reporting both internally and externally. 5. The disclosures must be timely and balanced – relative to materials that are concerned (Denis and McConnell, 2003; Eng and Mak, 2003; Solomon, 2007). 6. The rights of shareholders must be clearly recognised and upheld. 7. As all business decisions carry certain degree of risks and uncertainties, organisations are required to be able to employ effective oversight and internal control – in order to effectively manage such risk and uncertainties (Bhagat and Bolton, 2008). 8. The last but not least among the principles of corporate governance focuses on reward management – which is essential for attracting skills that are needed to drive shareholder's value optimisation (La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer and Vishny, 2000; Clark, 2004).

These areas of principles - which broadly concern roles of board/ senior executives, autonomy, integrity, disclosure, ethical business, stakeholders and shareholder interest, risk and reward management are essentially what determines the degree of credibility and effectiveness of corporate governance in any organisation (Solomon, 2007). However, based on Hofstede's (1980) cultural contexts, the effectiveness of these key principles can be influenced by the dominant/prevaling cultural ethos that shapes the environment in which organisations operate. Thus, it is the cultural dynamic of a specific space/environment that determines pattern of organisational behaviours and practices - including framework of rules, relationship, systems and processes by which corporate entities within such environment operates. Hofstede (1980) explain cultural context along the realm of six continuums: power distance (PD), masculinity vs femininity (MF), uncertainty avoidance (UA), individualism and collectivism (IDC), pragmatism and normative (PN), indulgent and restraint (IR), while Aycan, Kanungo, Mendonca, Yu, Deller, Stahl & Kurshid (2000) added paternalistic culture (CP). However, this study found PD (and PC) to be more closely relevant to the issue of poor corporate governance (Hofstede, 1991).

PD explains the degree to which unequal power distribution (or subordinate – superior relationship) is accepted and endorsed within a particular region or geographical setting (Hofstede, 2011). PD could be high or low. In a culture with high power distance (HPD) index, subordinates (e.g. servants, employees) are less likely (than in a low power distance culture) to rise up against their superiors (Kings, managers) in demand of their rights, due to various face concerns and others cultural givens that forbid individuals from appearing confrontational, disrespectful or bringing disrepute to their superiors (Ting-Toomey, 1988). It is against this backdrop that the study hopes to contribute to extant literature by exploring the role of high-power distance (HPD) culture in undermining corporate governance - particularly in the emergent economies such as Nigeria – using the empirical lens of corporations in the Nigerian

banking and petroleum sectors. The study is interpretive in nature, hence data gathered will be (qualitatively and) discursively analysed, which the rigour of critical discourse analytical (CDA) procedure can help to facilitate (Wodak, 2000; Fairclough, 2014). According to Wodak (2000), CDA ruptures human/organisational reality in cultural (Fairclough, 2003), social (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997), political (Peled-Elhanan, 2010), economic (Graham and Luke, 2011) and ideological (Fairclough, 1992, 2014) contexts, all of which can be instrumental in deepening understanding between culture, organisational culture and corporate governance. This is because CDA is a problem-oriented and multi-modal meaning making language tool, which explores how language/discourse is used to understand organisational believe, value and associated ways of doing things, which in Lawton's (2013, p. 107) word - is a process of understanding 'language in use'. Thus, by linking cultural context to corporate governance and the employment of non-conventional analytical tool - CDA, this study – it is hoped - responds to Legge's (1995) call for contemporary HRM and employment relations studies to be more critical, less prescriptive and to embrace interdisciplinary approach including in the adopted methodological predilection.

### **Cultural contexts: Perspective of high-power distance index**

Culture has been ascribed a number of definitions – albeit more or less with similar meaning. In "Dimensioning cultures: The Hofstede model in context", culture is viewed as a collective programming of mind", which sets out a particular member of group or categories of people from others (Hofstede, 2011). In consistence with the above, culture describes how individuals are raised in a given social space, hence it is the software of the mind, which shapes the norms, value, believe and how people perceive 'wrong' and 'rights'. As a consequence, culture is viewed to constitute unwritten rules of the social landscape, which implicates phenomena such as autonomy, sense of belonging, love and hate as well as respect, fear and loyalty among others (Hofstede, 1980). Furthermore, culture determines which contrasts (such as big vs small, clean vs dirty, female vs male etc.) matters in the life of individuals within specific social space. All of the above explain why culture is simply describes as the software of the mind programmed to align with the accepted values and norms within a given social space (Aycan, Kanungo and Mendonca, 2000).

As noted in the introductory section, Hofstede (1980) identified six key dimensions of culture. The first is power distance (PD), which describes the degree to which inequality (prevails and) is endorsed in a given society between the powerless and powerful. The second cultural context is individualism versus collectivism (IDV), which describes the level of ties that people have among themselves within a given society. A low IDV level indicates that interpersonal connection is weak among people that are not part of a core family (Hofstede, 1991), which means that individuals will not take responsibility for the actions and inaction of others. The reverse is the case in a collectivist cultural setting where individuals are more loyal and deference to the (rather large) group in which they belong and whose interest they defend (Hofstede, 2011). In the third dimension - masculinity versus femininity (MAS) which describes the cultural settings in which the role of men and women does not overlap, men are expected to be heroic, assertive, strong and fast – in contrast to modesty and soft nature that is expected of women. The fourth dimension - Uncertainty avoidance (UA) explains the degree to which individuals in a cultural setting can cope with anxiety. As opposed to a culture of low UA index where individuals are more relaxed and open, individuals on a high UA society

attempt to ensure that their life endeavours are as predicable and controllable as possibly can (Hofstede, 1980). The fifth is Long versus short term orientation (LSTO), which is formally known as ‘pragmatic versus normative’. Pragmatism, modesty and thrift are the simple terms used to describe long-term oriented culture, while principles, consistency, truth and nationalism are the focus of short-term oriented culture (Hofstede, 1980). Indulgence versus restrain (IVR) is the sixth cultural dimension. In a high IVR cultural index, individuals are more likely to allow themselves free gratification to their own emotions, pleasures and fun – as opposed to low IVR cultural settings where such gratifications are more likely to be suppressed and people’s behaviours regulated (Hofstede, 1991).

These six cultural dimensions have different implications for organisational behaviours and practices, however, power distance (PD) cultural is chosen for this study, to help uncover how high-power distance (HPD) index can influence compromise of corporate governance principles (Hofstede, 1980). As noted earlier, PD can be high or low in index, whereby subordinates (e.g. servants, employees) in the low index setting (LPD) are less likely (than in a high index setting HPD) to challenge their superiors (Kings, managers) against what they may perceive as mis(governance) (Kragh, 2016). This is largely due to what Ting-Toomey (1988) describes as various face concerns and others cultural givens, which forbid individuals from appearing disrespectful, confrontational or other forms of behaviours/actions that may appear to bring disrepute to their superiors or power that may be.

### **Context – Nigeria: studies on corporate governance in Nigeria**

Most developed countries (including Germany, Netherland, UK etc) have a low power distance culture, which makes it possible to some degree for employees to speak up to powers in work places (Hofstede, 1980). However, in developing countries (including Asian, Arabic and African countries) such as Nigeria which is largely shaped around high power distance culture, it is difficult or near impossible for stakeholders (employees, communities, investors etc.) to speak up in demand of their right (Umar and Hassan, 2014), transparency or to effectively challenge corporate (mis)governance. Broadly, studies have shown that employment relations and HRM practices celebrates instrumentalism, which accords greater power and authority to superiors (e.g. employers) over subordinates (employees) (Oyelere, 2014; Musa and Hassan, 2014). Nigeria is a collectivist society and endorses a culture of master-servant relationship and respect for hierarchy (Ahiauzu, 1989), which permeates organisational behaviours in the country. Hence, corporate governance issues surrounding roles of board members/senior executives, autonomy, integrity, disclosure, unethical business practices, poor stakeholder’s engagement and shareholder interest, risk and poor reward systems are systematically overlooked – consequent of HPD culture (Hofstede, 2001).

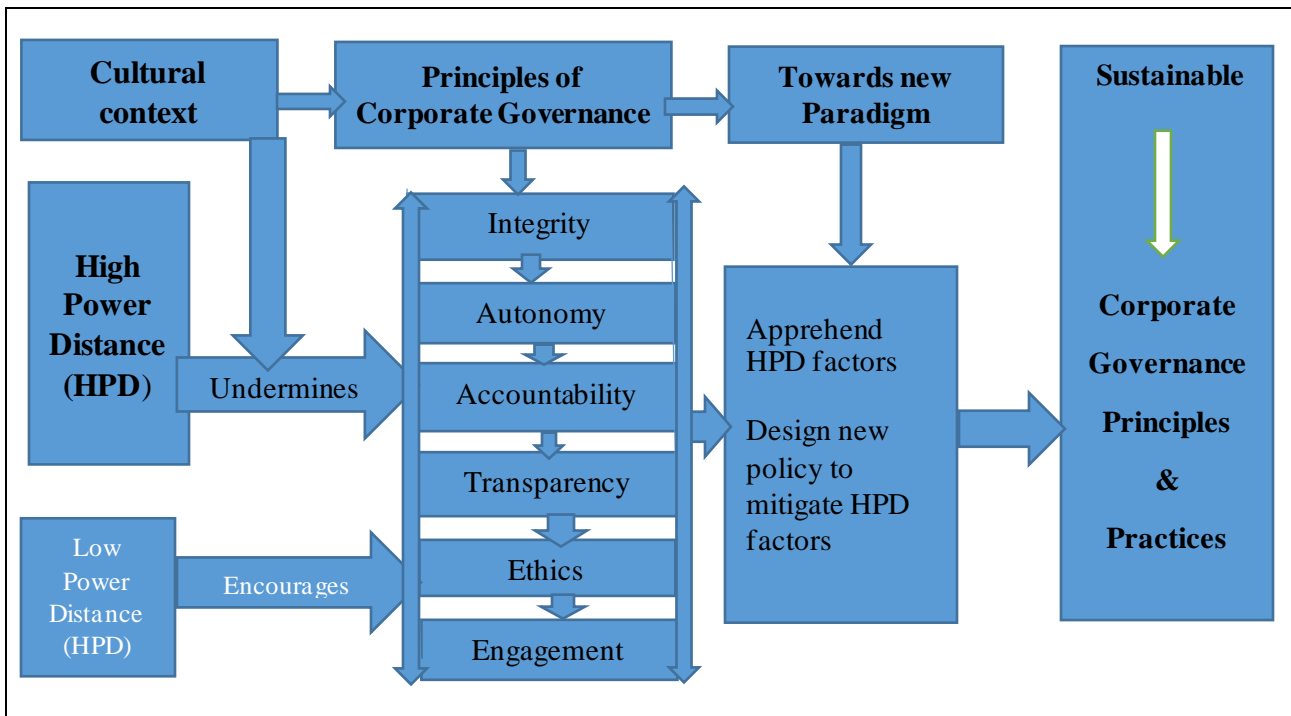
Numerous studies have engaged corporate governance in Nigeria from the realm of corporate ‘*status quo*’ (Ahunwan, 2002; Okike, 2007), “*galvanising shareholder activism*” (Amao and Amaeshi, 2008), “*governance structure and firm performance*” (Ehikioya, 2009; Duke and Kankpang, 2011; Peters and Bagshaw, 2014; Obeten, Ocheni and John, 2014; Dabor Isiavwe, Ajagbe, and Oke, 2015; Paul, Ebelechukwu and Yakubu, 2015; Abdulazeez, Ndibe and Mercy, 2016). Others have captured it from the contexts of “*challenges and solutions*” (Okpara, 2011; Adekoya, 2011; Nuhu, 2017), “*institutional determinants*” (Adegbite and Nakajima, 2011), “*regulatory framework*” (Adegbite, 2012; Abdulmalik and Ahmad, 2016; Okoye and Siwale, 2017) and “*compliance*” (Akinkoye and Olasanmi, 2014), “*public relations*

*and corporate communication*” (Oso and Semiu, 2012). Further studies have explored corporate governance using the lenses of “*corrupt practices, disclosures*” (Raimi, Suara and Fadipe, 2013; Uwuigbe and Ajibolade, 2013; Dembo and Rasaratnam, 2014), “*accountability*” (Nwagbara and Ugwoji, 2015), and “*antecedents, propositions and peculiarities*” (Adegbite, 2015). To the best knowledge of the author, apart from Oghojafor, George and Owoyemi’s (2012) study which covered corporate governance relative to “national culture”, no study has address the effect of high-power distance (HPD) on corporate governance principles. Oghojafor’s (2012) study superciliously touched on culture, but did not adequately specify any specific cultural context. This is where the current study takes departure- in emphasising HPD.

### **Conceptual framework: Corporate governance principles Vs cultural context**

Given that the study aims to establish how cultural contexts can inhibit corporate governance – particularly from the realm of high-power distance (HPD) index, it becomes imperative to explore this through the lens of the basic principles of corporate governance. A range of principles constituting corporate governance were highlighted earlier in this study, which includes the roles of the board and senior executives – relative to their skills, experience and autonomy (Council, 2007). Others includes need for integrity among those who can influence the organisations’ strategy and economic performance with specific reference to ethical practice. Perhaps, some of the most essential aspect of corporate governance principles are directed towards stakeholder’s interest and accountability, transparency and timely information disclosure regarding corporate financial, social and environmental related activities (Clark, 2004). Thus, the basics principles constituting corporate governance is not only clear; but stands to contrast that which constitutes HPD cultural index (Kragh, 2016). HPD is characterised by centralised systems/organisations, complex hierarchies, authority, respect, dominance and compensations gaps, which is different from flatter systems/organizations - where for instance managers and employees are considered as equals to some degree, which makes healthy exchanges possible between those considered superiors and subordinates (Aycaan et al., 2000). However, the unequal power relations that characterises HPD cultural index makes it near impossible for a healthy exchange to take place between subordinates and superiors (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). Hence, in a corporate setting where dominant culture is HPD, corporate governance issues relating to integrity, disclosure, unethical business, stakeholder’s engagement and shareholder interest, risk and poor reward systems by organisations’ top executives (Council. 2007) are systematically overlooked or accepted, because those in the position of authority and influence cannot be challenged (Ting-Toomey, 1988). See fig.1.

***Fig.1: Apprehending & Mitigating HPD Factors for Effective Corporate Governance (AMHECG)***



Sources: drawn from Hofstede (1980), Council (2007)

Integrity is one of the core principles of corporate governance (Council, 2007), which can be effectively tested in a low power distance cultural setting where individuals are more likely to question the integrity of those in a position of authority (Hofstede, 1980). It is highly unlikely that individuals in a HPD index will jettison the culture of respect and deference, or summon the courage to challenge the integrity of those in high (organisational) position. Similarly, the autonomy of individual to act responsibly forms the basics at all levels of corporate governance, but this may not be the case in a HPD where power is centralised and decision on corporate activities come directly from the above (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Also, the credibility of corporate governance is largely dependent upon the level of stakeholder's accountability and transparency perceived of the organisations in question (Clarke, 2004), however, individuals in position of authority do not often feel duty-bound to be accountable and transparent to those whom they consider to be subordinates in a HPD setting. Similarly, subordinates on HPD cultural index are less likely to be considered worthy of being engaged or included in decision making process by those in the position of authority (Hofstede, 1980). All of the above problematises the issue of ethics in corporate governance, which may never be brought to perspective consequent of the prevailing HPD cultural index within the social space in which firms operate (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). It is therefore essential that organisations apprehend the effect of cultural context of HPD on the effectiveness of the principles which guides their corporate governance, in order to inform policy change – with specific focus on mitigating or reducing the effect HPD.

## Methodology

This study is a qualitative interpretive study which aims to gain an in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2013) of the relationship between HPD index and corporate (mis)governance. The relationship between HPD index and CG is at the heart of this study's epistemology, which is

social constructionism. According Patton (2015), social constructionist views that human reality is socially constructed, hence, it becomes imperative that the need to engage the social actors via qualitative means (e.g. interview social group, observation), in order to establish the why and how underpinning the construction of social reality (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Saunders et al., 2012). The study will rely on critical discourse analysis (CDA) of semi structured – face-to-face interview data drawn from about 29 managerial and non-managerial staff across 2 banking and petroleum firms in Nigeria. This approach can help to represent participants' opinion, because it interrogates and interprets lived world including socio-cultural and historical phenomena relating the subject matter, hence its qualitative underpinning (Patton, 2015). As Saunders et al. (2009) noted, one of the essentials of qualitative research is that it not only measures outcomes; but also processes in-depth study, which quantitative approach may not facilitate (Creswell, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

This study has effectively drawn on the interface of high-power distance (HPD) culture, to theorise challenges of corporate governance principles - particularly from the lens of emerging economies - such as Nigeria, where leadership ethos and dynamic of governance has been deeply immersed in servant-master relationship and culture of respect for superiors, which makes challenging those in position of authority (for accountability) difficult or near impossible. Essentially, it is this nature of subordinate-superior mindset that permeates corporate settings particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria - where dominant culture is HPD, hence, corporate mal (practices) including lack of transparency, accountability, autonomy, ethics, integrity and stakeholder's engagement – the core of CG principles – are systematically allowed to go unchallenged. Thus, issues relating to lack of integrity, disclosure, unethical business, stakeholder's engagement and shareholder interest, risk and poor reward systems by organisations' top executive are systematically overlooked, because those in the position of authority and influence cannot be challenged, hence the status quo remains. The practical implication of this contention for businesses - is that the dynamic of HPD needs to be apprehended, to help inform policy change that is crucial in addressing and challenging corporate mal (practices). To empirically support this contention, the study intends to employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) of semi structured – face-to-face interview data drawn from about 25 managerial and non-managerial staff across 2 banking and petroleum firms. The findings of the investigation (which is predictably expected to be consistent with the proposal) and scope for further research will be presented following analysis of the empirical data.

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