Language and Communication for Domestic Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

Dr. Eserinune McCarty MOJAYE[1*]

1.   Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of the Social Sciences, Delta State University, Abraka,Tel: 234-803-711-4609

* Email: mojayemccarty@gmail.com, emvmojaye@yahoo.com

Abstract

Language and communication can be through verbal, non-verbal or written media. What defines humanity is language which is the vehicle of communication. Language is regarded as the key to the heart of a people. Language and communication, therefore, are very crucial in the management and resolution of conflicts or disputes between the parties in a conflict situation. This paper examines how language and communication can be used as weapons in the resolution of domestic conflicts. It argues that since every human being has a family or a home, the starting point for addressing conflicts of whatever dimension should be the home through the use of language and communication. It further argues that language and communication are indispensable in this world of wars and continued eruption of conflicts and disputes. The paper concludes that language and communication should be more analysed and utilized in the management and resolution of conflicts in the society. The significance of the arguments of this paper is that if domestic conflicts are eliminated or curbed through the simple and more cost-effective means of language and communication, then conflicts and wars on the wider scene would also diminish and nations can devote more resources to development projects.

Key Words: Language, Communication, Conflict, Family, Home.

Introduction

Conflicts have always been part of human existence. Whether the conflicts are within an individual as expressed by the inner tugging of his heart, or between individuals or groups, conflicts are always with humanity. This paper focuses on intra-personal and inter-personal conflicts as experienced in the family and the home. The home is the first place where human communality is practiced. It is the starting place and the foundation of most adult activity. The assumption here is that conflicts, nationally, continentally or internationally, do not just occur. Conflicts begin in the home, in childhood, and in the end get perfected in adulthood. According to UNFPA (2005), every year, violence in the home and the community devastates the lives of millions of women. Since every human being has a family, or a home, the starting point for addressing conflicts of whatever dimension is therefore the home. If domestic conflicts are eliminated or curbed, conflicts on the wider scene would also diminish. Language is one of the major means of human communication. Thus, this paper focuses on how language can be used as a weapon in the establishment of domestic conflict and the means of its eradication.

Asobie, (2004) asserts that conflict is a normal part of any healthy relationship in a home. After all, two people cannot be expected to agree on everything, all the time. Learning how to deal with conflict, rather than avoiding it, is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can cause great harm to a relationship, but when handled in a respectful, positive way, conflicts provide an opportunity to strengthen the bond between two people. By learning the skills for conflict resolution, one can keep personal and professional relationships strong and growing.

The universality of conflicts makes it an experience of all human beings. Conflicts can strengthen relationships when they are seen as vehicles of change. If someone's actions or inactions are seen to breed conflicts, then change may be inevitable in order to preserve the relationship. But if conflicts are unresolved, they may degenerate into violent situations.
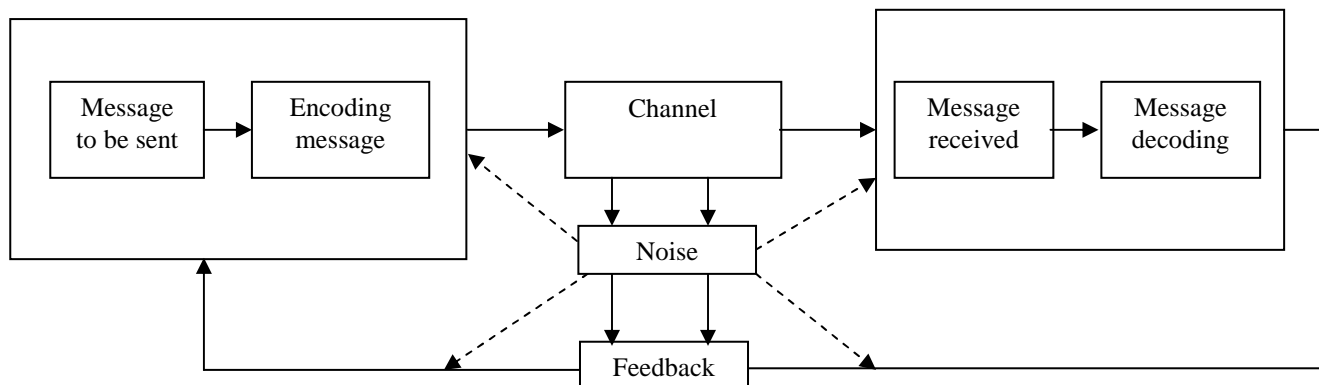
Abama and Enighe (2005) are of the view that conflict arises from differences, both large and small. It occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires. Sometimes these differences appear trivial, but when a conflict triggers strong feelings, a deep personal need is often at the core of the problem. These needs can be the need to feel safe and secure, to feel respected and valued, or a need for greater closeness and intimacy.

Communication

According to Nwokocha (2004), communication is the process of passing of information from one person (or group) to another person (or group) so that both sides understand the message or information being passed. The same way, it is the process of transmitting a message in order to evoke a specific and discriminating response or feedback from the receiver – it must either influence an action or another communication - and it is meant to induce a reaction.

Communication is inherently a social process. Whether one communicates face to face with a single person or with a group of people through the mass media, it is still a social activity involving two or more people. By analyzing the communication process, one discovers that it is a chain made up of identifiable links. According to Robbins and Judge (2008),   before communication can take place, a purpose expressed as a message to be conveyed, is needed. It passes between a sender and a receiver. The message is encoded (converted to a symbolic form) and passed by way of some medium (channel) to the receiver, who retranslates (decodes) the message initiated by the sender.

Fig. 1: The Communication Process

Source: Robbins S.P. and Judge T.A. (2008). *Organizational Behaviour*. New Delhi: PHI Private Limited.

From the foregoing, communication can be seen as a relationship or interaction to make something known by means of understood symbols between people or groups that have something in common with each other. A home or a family is built on language and non-verbal communication usually reinforces verbal communication.

Conflicts

Conflict may be defined as a clash, a fight or simply a confrontation between individuals or groups. Conflict can be explained from the point of view of antagonistic interest and incompatible goals and it "encompasses a broad spectrum of empirical phenomena ranging from disputes between individuals to wars between states" (Albert, 2003). Conflict is the construction of a special type of reality and may be viewed as occurring along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling), and behavioural (action) dimensions (Albert, 2003).

Conflict certainly has a bad reputation. If you ask many people "what is conflict?" they are likely to answer with the worst examples, such as wars and other forms of violence. But conflict in its less extreme forms is a fundamental feature of everyday life in all human societies – and it is one of the most important ways that much of social, cultural and scientific progress have been achieved over many thousands of years. Conflict can inspire change, and make people passionate about finding solutions to problems.

Faheli (2000) notes that the first point is that a conflict involves some sort of disagreement or dispute – usually over a matter that at least one of the people involved thinks is important. This may seem obvious, but there are hidden issues here. For example, the people involved in a conflict may not agree just what the important matter is, or even if it is important. Different people can have very different perceptions of any dispute – and in fact they almost always do. Conflicts are often exaggerated by such confusion and misunderstanding – and determining the real matters of disagreement is one of the most important tasks in conflict resolution.

Domestic Conflict

According to Benson-Eluwa (2004), domestic conflict (closely related to domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence and intimate partner violence) is a pattern of behavior which involves violence or other abuse by one person against another in a domestic context, such as in marriage or cohabitation. As noted by Ezeocha and Mojaye (2011) "around the world at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her life time".

Domestic violence often occurs because the perpetrator believes that abuse is justified and acceptable. Awareness, perception, definition and documentation of domestic violence differ widely from country to country. There may be a period of abuse during which tensions rise and an act of violence is committed, followed by a period of reconciliation and calm.

Victims of domestic violence may be trapped in such domestic violent situations through fear, isolation, shame, insufficient financial resources, or simply to protect children. As a result of abuse, victims may experience physical disabilities, chronic health problems, mental illness, limited finances, and poor ability to

create healthy relationships. Children who live in a household with violence may continue the legacy of abuse when they reach adulthood.

Language

According to Ulbaek (1998), language comprises of the human capacity to acquire and use complex systems of communication. Ulbaek (1998) also sees language primarily as the mental faculty that allows humans to undertake linguistic behavior, that is, to learn languages and to produce and understand utterances. This definition stresses the universality of language to all humans and it emphasizes the biological basis for the human capacity for language as a unique development of the human brain. In like manner, Orewere (1998) sees language as an intricate network of interlinked elements; which bring about a new consciousness and a change in behaviour.

Domestic violence in Nigeria

Kehinde (2010) notes that over half of Nigerian women are subjected to domestic violence in their homes. Domestic violence affects all social groups and can consist of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Although men can also be affected by domestic violence, women suffer disproportionately.

This trend occurs across much of the world, but Nigeria's discriminatory laws and dismissive police compound its particularly high rates of domestic violence. Most potently, its prevalent culture of silence and stigma for the victims of domestic violence hinders public acknowledgement of the problem. There exists an urgent need to challenge the social prejudices and institutional structures in order to for Nigeria protect her women, not just from danger, but also from ridicule, fear and isolation.

On a daily basis, Nigerian women are beaten, raped and even murdered by members of their family for supposed transgressions, which can range from not having meals ready on time, to visiting family members without their husband's permission. Nelson and Brown (2011) confirms this when they assert that some states in Nigeria have "become infamous for atrocious practices against children". According to Nelson and Brown (2011), in many communities "children are accused of bewitching their parents and family members and have consequently been evicted, tortured and some even murdered either by their parents or prophets." Although more widespread in South Asia, acid attacks on women which cause extreme pain, disfigurement and fatality, have also been on the increase in Nigeria in recent times.

Oyeshola (2005) asserts that a combination of factors contribute to the high rates of domestic violence in Nigeria. In general, domestic violence is seen as a 'private' matter to be dealt with by the family, typically a domain of male authority. Nigerian women are expected to behave with subservience to their husbands, and domestic violence is often accepted as part of marriage. According to Amnesty International, many Nigerians expect a woman to endure whatever she meets in her matrimonial home and to provide sex and obedience to her husband. Some victims even see domestic violence as a sign of love. Domestic violence in Nigeria is often viewed as a necessary corrective tool for women, at best a part and parcel of married life. Robinson (2009), lists many factors that help to perpetuate domestic violence. These include:

- The inability of many women to escape violence and domination due to their disadvantaged economic status. Many women and girls depend on the financial resources of their husband, father or families. This forces them to put up with domination for fear of the withdrawal of such financial support.
- A culture of silence that stigmatises the victims of domestic violence rather than the perpetrators.
- Many Nigerians have little faith in the integrity or capacity of the police to redress crimes of domestic abuse. Sometimes, when complaints are brought to the police by victims of domestic violence, they are told to go home and be good housewives. In other words, to return home and remain subservient to their husbands.
- Discriminatory national laws that pose serious threats to women's safety. The penal code in northern Nigeria permits the use of any means to correct a child, pupil, servant or wife as long as it does not amount to grievous harm (Section 55). In like manner, marital rape is excluded from the definition of rape under Sharia penal code in northern Nigeria and under the criminal code in southern Nigeria.

Communication efforts in traditional societies have always been directed towards achieving change. This desire for change is unfortunately one reason for domestic conflicts. In pre-colonial Nigeria, a man marries a woman when she is still a "baby"; as such , she learns most of what she needed to learn in her husband's house. If however her husband do not like some things in her, change would be required. If the change required by the husband runs counter to what the wife has been used to during her little stay with her parents, she is bound to show some resistance. And because the husband does not really realize that he married a full human being, capable of taking her own decisions based on her thinking, he makes the change he requires a command. In this circumstance, although the wife obeys her husband, she does so grudgingly and in this way, a conflict has been given birth to. In contemporary Nigeria however, the women are more assertive, but even with that, when a husband expects his wife to be a yes-woman, then she is bound to react one day and conflict will ensue.

In Nigeria, it is almost impossible to find a relationship that is devoid of disagreement or misunderstanding. Whether it is between a boy friend and a girl friend, a husband and a wife, parents and children, neighbours, colleagues, siblings, etc, misunderstanding and conflicts are common features. As noted by a Nollywood (Nigerian film industry) celebrity, in "every relationship, you have problems in-between, there is no relationship that just goes on smoothly" (Sholola, 2014). In Nigeria as in other places in the world, domestic conflicts are everyday occurrences. They occur between parents and children, husbands and a wives, siblings and parents, siblings and siblings, etc. Cases of domestic violence in Nigeria include rape, incest, abuse of children, verbal abuse, threats, etc. A typical example is presented below.

Joan was her father's favourite as she not only looked like him but also inherited his mannerisms. He doted on her daily and had a mental computer print-out of what he wanted her to be, not for her sake but for his. He had programmed she would be a medical doctor, a surgeon of international repute with emphasis on either cardiology or the brain. All was going well until Joan started schooling and discovered she hated mathematics. When she got to secondary school, she chose the Arts as she was not at home with the science subjects. Her father almost had a heart attack. He pleaded with her, begged, sweet-talked, cajoled, all to no avail. Then he threatened to withdraw academic sponsorship. A terrible conflict ensued as father and daughter were no longer on talking terms in the same house. When they had to talk about each other to other family members, they used "that stupid and worthless girl, the worst ingrate I have ever seen", and "that wicked, old man who thinks the whole world should be his slaves".

With no solution in sight, the conflict deepened and eventually, Joan, ran away from home into the "safe" arms of a male lover who "just let her be". The point is that children would naturally react to parents who want to re-live their lives through them (the children). Many undocumented conflicts have arisen because parents attempted forcing careers or professions on their unwilling children. When parents and children have the same ideas, plans or thoughts, there would usually be no conflicts. But where parents hand down choices on their children in form of commands or orders, they (the children) would feel short-changed and rebel and such rebellion is usually the consequence of unresolved conflicts. Such type of domestic conflicts also arises where children are faced with the choice of spouses. Parents may disagree with their children's choice(s) on grounds of ethnicity, education, wealth, religion or even creed and when the child insists, a conflict results.

In cases such as these, parents can employ language use as a panacea to the problem. Reasoning through dialogue could be used to bring children to "see reason(s)" with their parents and hopefully "fall in line". But when language is used authoritatively like in a military barracks, the children would feel that their fundamental human rights are being scuttled and as such, would revolt so seriously that the conflict situation may appear unsolvable.

Since ineffective communication can degenerate into power struggle, it becomes clear that lack of proper and adequate communication in a family would likely result in conflicts. Another cause of domestic conflict in Nigeria is tradition. Traditionally, men do not like their women to be assertive or articulate or to answer back to them. Since violence is a learned behaviour arising from inability to resolve conflicts, the men, unable to handle the assertiveness of their women, resort to violence. Thus, violence which has its genesis in unresolved domestic conflicts has become, for many Nigerians, a way of life. But it usually begins in the home and extends to the streets and other places thereby affecting everyone. Little wonder then that conflicts exist at every level of society.

Often, in intimate relationships, conflicts originate from jealousy. This later builds up into tensions and eventually, if not resolved, they become outbursts of temper and consequently violence. For others, conflict is in-built as they are "natural" bullies who thrive on controversies. They are controversial by nature sometimes with the help of, or a boost from alcohol.

Men have always argued that it is the dynamics of language that makes them use the kind of language they use against their women. They argue that language allows its use humourously to lighten the mood and reduce the tension that every day stress puts on. But language is used to remove stress from one person and put it on another, conflicts arise.

Another cause of domestic violence is disparity in educational attainment between couples. When an educated man marries an uneducated or half-educated woman, there is bound to be a very wide margin in their thinking patterns and their interpretation of events and utterances. The frustration that one partner feels at not being understood is bound to create tensions that will likely degenerate into conflicts.

Furthermore, when the economic role of the man is negatively reversed, conflict ensues. If for instance a man loses his job and his wife becomes the breadwinner, he is likely to feel threatened as his headship would seem to be in question. The "natural" tendency is to take out his frustrations on his wife and conflict will be born.

Other factors include religious differences, a situation that occurs when couples are of different religious convictions or faiths. Again, when children dictate to their parents what to do, conflicts could arise. Usually, parents call the shots at home, lovingly providing guidance, discipline and models to the children. But

some parents, in order to show how much they "love" their children, give them the run of the house, When in the future the parents realize their mistake and want to reclaim authority and enforce discipline, conflicts result. Manner of voice manipulation could also bring about domestic conflicts. When a spouse or parent or child or sibling raises the voice instead of talking gently, misunderstanding may occur no matter how well intentioned the information. This will inadvertently lead to or bring about conflicts. To overcome this, words and sentences like "please", "am sorry", "excuse me", "thank you", "forgive me", etc should, be part of family vocabulary.

No matter how we try, human beings cannot totally avoid being angry but when angry or provoked, it will be of utmost importance to try hard to quietten the fiery spirit and keep silent for a while before one speaks. An old adage says, "when you feel mad inside, count ten before saying a word". In conflicts, the one who inflicts more pain wins, just like in wars. And this is because of the omnipotence and omnipresence of communication. So individuals must learn to take control of their speech.

Abused marriages, homes and relationships do not mirror an ideal society and if there is violence in our homes, we cannot possibly have tranquility in the nation at large.

Domestic conflicts, if unresolved would bring about strains in family relationships. Since homes are the classrooms for learning social behaviour, strained relationships at home would inevitably lead to strained relationships in the wider society. On the other hand, if family members can learn to resolve family conflicts, it is almost a cinch that conflict resolution in the wider society would be a fore-gone conclusion.

When conflicts occur domestically, family members put the blame on each other in order to absolve themselves. This is also reflected in the wider society where politicians, for example, engage in a lot of mudslinging against their opponents in order to be seen as the "good boys" and to gain the upper hand. Thus, the far-reaching effects of unresolved or even resolved domestic conflicts, are immeasurable but they reverberate all over a nation.

Use of language in handling domestic conflicts

Polite language, if institutionalized in homes as a means of curbing domestic conflicts, can be transferred into the wider society. When this is done, it would not be difficult for members of a society to say "I am sorry", "forgive me" or other such forms and because a soft answer turns away wrath, conflicts in the society would reduce. This way, polite language will replace those verbal uses that put down, hurt and cause pain, eventually leading to conflict. This is because language is an instrument of alienation as well as integration.

Language does not always precipitate conflicts, but its use or misuse does because language is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Language is the golden egg-layer in the resolution of domestic conflicts because domestic conflicts usually occur when language used during intimate or causal communication is not good enough.

Since communication is the single most important skill needed to stem the tide of domestic conflicts, the better we communicate, the more control we have over people and the more likely we are to keep domestic conflicts at bay; this means that communication is the string that holds human societies together.

Anything that threatens communication threatens human existence and peaceful co-existence. This paper advocates the creative use of language for conflict resolution or dialogue for conflict resolution through the right choice of words. The reason for this advocacy stems from the fact that communication is geared towards influencing behaviour positively. A Chinese proverb says that "the tongue has the power of life and death and an anxious heart weighs a man down but a kind word cheers him up". Another proverb says "Be careful what you ask, you may just get it". All of these go to show how very important our use of language is in creating our world.

Verbal abuse which usually degenerates into conflicts is characterized by language use that puts down, demeans or causes some form of psychological injury. More often, the closer the relationship, the deeper the hurt, embarrassment and humiliation. This is because language is a loaded weapon -- both an offensive and a defensive weapon. When the weapon of language is used to cause offense, especially to an intimate partner, conflict cannot be avoided. Verbal abuse which precedes real conflicts, leaves a person feeling less than human. Whether it is in word-twisting, name-calling or just verbal provocation, verbal abuse with language has a corrosive effect; it corrodes the sufferer's sense of self worth and self esteem. Sometimes this abuse or misuse of language could be in form of an uttered threat (which is also communication) which leaves the victim very fearful and unable to fully develop confidence. Such situation strengthens conflicts. Dirty jokes are really not funny as they inflict far more harm than can be imagined, deepening conflicts. But there are other ways of resolving differences and abating anger or pleasure as anger and laugher are usually used as excuses or reasons for encouraging or creating conflicts.

A home or a family is built on language and usually non-verbalized language reinforces verbalized language. So even when verbalized or uttered language seems harsh, it can actually be softened by "unuttered utterances" like a hug, a smile, or even a positive and loving eye contact.

Conclusion

From the premise that language constitutes a community's shared stock of meaning, we can conclude that language use may provide an excellent communication entry point for investigating how members of a group understand and handle domestic conflict.

Language can be a venom which triggers off conflicts of diverse nature. Similarly, it can also be the panacea for conflict management and resolution. For ages, nations, states, and communities have contended with language-induced crises and conflicts. This bizarre situation and inhumanity by man against his fellow man inflicts alarming and severe consequences on the victims.

This paper has examined the ways in which language can ignite domestic conflicts or rifts that can retard both personal, communal and national development. It postulates that language can be a veritable instrument for domestic conflict management and resolution. The family like any other organization that involves two or more people, needs to be governed, the home has to be ruled and its affairs need to be controlled and directed, to make for peace and fulfillment. In all these, communication serves as a veritable tool. Better communication and understanding at home will eventually reduce conflicts in the larger society.

Suggestions for further research

This paper has only taken a theoretical look at how language and communication can be used for domestic conflict resolution, citing some examples in a few cases. However, more analytical studies need to be undertaken to investigate how language and communication has been used to eliminate or reduce domestic conflicts in real life situations. Such studies will not only help to buttress the fact that language and communication can be used to resolve conflicts, but they will point out the ways in which language and communication have been used, and can be used to resolve conflicts.

References

Abama, E.A. & Enighe, J.M (2005). *Communication and Domestic Violence in Nigeria*. Jos: Sathographics Press.

Albert, I. O. (2003). *Mainstreaming: Positive leadership in conflict transformation in Nigeria*. Lagos: Centre for Social Science Research and Development

Asobie, A. (2004). *Conflict Resolution and Human Rights: A Case Study Approach*. Ibadan: E-Watch Print Media.

Benson-Eluwa, V. (2004). *Family Communication: Key to Happy Living*. Enugu: Virgin Creation.

Chambers Dictionary of English Language.

Ezeocha, J.C. and Mojaye, E.M. (2011). Mass media influence on discrimination and violence against women in Delta State, Nigeria. *Journal of Communication and Media Research*, 3 (1): 75-92.

Faheli, S.A. (2000). *Theories of Social Conflict.* Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd.

Faheli, S. A. (2006). Theories of social conflict. In G. Shedrach (ed.), *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa*: *A Reader.* Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

Kehinde, F. O. (2010). Managing the conflict between landlords and tenants in Lagos State. Unpublished Masters Dissertation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

Nelson, E.E. and Brown, A.S. (2011). Witchcraft, social discontent and child abuse in south-south Nigeria: Ethnographic description and implications for communication and advocacy campaigns. *Journal of Communication and Media Research*, 3 (2): 131-143.

Nwokocha, A.G (2004). *Communication and Culture*: Lagos: Longman Publishers.

Onasanya, S.A.B. (1999). *Effective Personnel Management and Industrial Relations*. Lagos: Centre for Management Development.

Orewere, B. (1998): Woman, Communication and Self-Actualization. *The Plateau State Woman, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Jos, Ehindero Press.

Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English.

Oyeshola, O. P. (2005). *Conflict and Context of Conflict Resolution*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press.

Robbins, S.P. and Judge, T.A. (2008). *Organizational Behaviour.* New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited.

Robinson, M. L. (2009). "Just Conflict: Harnessing the transformative power of Conflict to create just Relationships. Retrieved from: http://www.creativeco

Sholola, D. (2014). Real reasons my marriage crashed – Uche Ogbodo. *Vanguard*, 27 September, p. 32.

Ulbaek, I. (1998). The Origin of Language and Cognition. In J. R. Hurford & C. Knight. *Approaches to the evolution of language*. Cambridge University Press.

UNFPA (2005). The promise of equality. *UNFPA state of the world population*. London:Earth Scan.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:
http://www.iiste.org

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: http://www.iiste.org/journals/ All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: http://www.iiste.org/book/

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digtial Library , NewJour, Google Scholar