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WORKPLACE BULLYING AND OCCUPATIONAL STRESS IN MANUFACTURING FIRMS IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of workplace bullying and occupational stress in manufacturing firms in southeast Nigeria as the broad objective with a specific objective and a hypothesis accompanying it. Person-Environment (P-E) Fit Theory was used in anchoring the work. A survey research design was adopted by the study. The population of the study consisted of 798 employees of 25 manufacturing firms from the five southeastern states in Nigeria. A sample size of 259 was gotten by the application of Krejcie and Morgan's 1970 sample size formula. The method of data collection was primary, with a structured questionnaire being the instrument and was tested for reliability and validity. The data collected were analyzed using correlation analysis and the hypothesis was tested at a 5% level of significance. Results revealed that there is a statistically significant relationship between work-related bullying and occupational stress among workers in manufacturing firms in southeast Nigeria ($r = 0.918$, $P\text{-value} < 0.05$). The study, therefore, concluded that workplace bullying has a relationship with occupational stress. Hence, it was recommended that the management of the manufacturing firms should know the

threshold of employees' tolerance, so as not to push them to the extent of the employee seeing it as bullying, and therefore, make them more stressed.

Keywords: Workplace Bullying, Work-Related Bullying, Stress, Occupation Stress, Manufacturing Firms and Southeast Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Many establishments around the world, particularly manufacturing firms, are reporting an alarming increase in the negative effects of bullying and occupational stress in their various workplaces, which has impacted productivity. Salin (2020) states that workplace bullying is a type of interpersonal mistreatment that extends beyond mere incivility and consists of deliberate and repetitive derogatory acts directed at an individual or individuals, as well as the creation of oppressive work environments. It has been identified as one of the most stressful situations that can occur. It is harmful to the victim's physical and psychological health (Hauge, Skogstad & Einarsen, 2021; Duffy & Brown, 2018; Pheko, 2018). It is the repeated mistreatment of one employee by one or more employees through a malicious mix of humiliation, intimidation, and performance sabotage (Margaret, 2017). Margaret (2017) went on to say that it includes being ridiculed in front of other employees, being lied about to others, feeling constantly on guard, being unable to focus on work tasks, losing self-confidence on the job, and experiencing out-of-control anxiety.

Contrary to popular belief, bullying is not the same as aggression. Bullying entails repeatedly attacking the target, whereas aggression may only involve one act, leading to a persistent pattern of behaviour (Brodsky, 2016). Bullies can be difficult and demanding superiors as long as their main goal is to achieve the highest level of performance by having high standards. Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen (2021) state that it comprises actions that humiliate, denigrate, offend, or intimidate a worker, frequently in public. Bullying impairs a person's right to dignity at work and gives the target a sense of helplessness. Instead of a boss bullying employees, peer bullying occurs frequently, which has led to many employees in various workplaces experiencing differing degrees of melancholy and stress related to their jobs.

Olagunju (2020) defines stress as a persistent, complicated emotional state characterized by apprehension and present in a variety of neurological and mental diseases. Stress is essentially a person's outward manifestation of how their basic needs are being violated in a world of conflicting demands. It is a person's emotional and physical reaction to perceived demands and difficulties. Alam, Gouhar and Shafiqur (2015) opine that it is any demand made on a person by physical, emotional, or mental elements that necessitate coping mechanisms. It is an unpleasant emotional experience that is followed by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive, and behavioural changes that are intended to either change the events or accommodate their effects (Sun & Chiou, 2018).

Occupational stress is related to stress emanating from membership in organizations. Pheko (2018) defines occupational stress as an unpleasant emotional situation that a worker in an organization faces when requirements (work-related or otherwise) are incompatible with their ability to resolve them. They emanate from inappropriate demands made by the organization itself. High levels of organizational politics, demanding organizational cultures, and bad leadership styles are a few of these that can cause conflict; intensify unhealthy competitiveness

among people, and increase stress (Ivancevich, Konapske & Matteson, 2017). This causes emotional changes as a reaction to the danger, which stems from a person's relationship with his environment, and it appears as subjective pressure because the same stress can affect one person but not another. When a worker is able to manage job pressures and the likelihood of completing a task is high, stress can serve as a motivator (Halkos & Dimitrios, 2018). McShane (2020) urges that workplace violence, sexual harassment, unequal pay and incentives, a lack of performance feedback, poor career development, and bullying are some of the factors contributing to an increase in occupational stress among workers in firms.

Workplace bullying has developed into a significant occupational stressor that affects targets of bullying more frequently, increasing absenteeism and attrition while also lowering morale, health, and job performance (Lee & Brotheridge, 2021). Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen (2015) aver that occupational stress brought on by environmental stressors may have an effect on workers in such a way that it exposes them and makes them more vulnerable to bullying.

Both workplace bullying and occupational stress have received extensive attention in organizational psychology (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2019). One of the most stressful occurrences that could happen is workplace bullying, which has detrimental impacts on the victim's physical and mental health (Giorgi, Perminiene, Montani, Fiz-Perez, Mucci & Arcangeli, 2016; Sojo, Wood, & Genat, 2016). Shelley, Pickett, Mancini, McDougle, Rissler and Cleary (2017) opined that workplace bullying is a severe problem that also affects manufacturing firms. This issue requires immediate management. Managers and supervisors have an ethical and moral duty to shield their staff from a hostile work environment. The victim's emotional condition, relationships, and quality of life all alter when they become the victim of workplace bullying.

Imtiaz and Ahmad (2021) aver that stress affects a large number of workers in firms on a global scale. Workers in manufacturing companies in the southeast of Nigeria, which includes Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi state also face some type of stress while performing their duties in order to achieve optimum production just like their global counterparts. Bullies at work make for poor managers because they produce high staff turnover, high rates of sick leave, and low morale and productivity. Some of these issues were observed in the manufacturing firms studied, hence, the need to ascertain the effect of workplace bullying and occupational stress in manufacturing firms in southeast Nigeria. Specifically, the objective of the study intends to ascertain how work-related bullying causes psychological stress among workers in manufacturing firms in southeast Nigeria.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Workplace Bullying

Björkqvist, Österman and Hjelt-Bäck (2014) state that workplace bullying is a persistent behaviour that is intended to cause mental (but occasionally also bodily) suffering for the victim(s) and is directed at one or more people who are unable to defend themselves. Workplace mobbing and workplace harassment are other names for workplace bullying (Brodsky, 2016). Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper (2019) opine that workplace bullying is an escalating process in which the person confronted ends up in a subordinate position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. Bullying in the workplace can lead to employee frustration and depression (Yldrm, 2021), which can lead to interpersonal conflict, and interpersonal conflict can lead to deviant behaviour. Workplace bullying includes behaviours like harassing,

offending, socially excluding, and negatively impacting someone's ability to do their job duties (Leymann, 2012; Reknes, Einarsen, Knardahl & Lau, 2014).

Categories of Workplace Bullying

The various categories of bullying in the workplace are:

- 1) *Person-related bullying*: Person-related bullying is regarded as a form of stress that can have a negative impact on a person's health. Person-related bullying is thought to increase the risk of psycho-physical symptoms, mood and personality changes, and psychiatric disorders like anxiety-depression disorder, chronic adjustment disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Beswick, Gore & Palferman, 2016). Public humiliation, ignoring, insulting, spreading rumours or gossip, invading private, screaming, and other similar activities are examples of person-related bullying.
- 2) *Work-related bullying*: Work-related bullying according to Einarsen and Raknes (2017), is all those recurrent behaviours directed at one or more employees that are unwanted by the victim, whether they are done consciously or unconsciously, and that clearly cause humiliation, offence, and distress. Delivering unrealistic tasks, impossible deadlines, excessive workloads, giving meaningless tasks or providing unclear information, threatening security, and other similar activities are examples of work-related bullying (Beswick, Gore & Palferman, 2016).

Factors that Cause Workplace Bullying in a Firm

Dickson (2015) states that several factors can increase the risk of workplace bullying in an organization:

- a) *Worker characteristics*: If not properly handled, socioeconomic factors specific to a company, such as age, gender, parental status, apprentice status, or trainee status, might directly encourage bullying behaviours. Because of their age, employees of an organization may choose to bully a co-worker who does not grasp the rules of hierarchical jurisdiction.
- b) *Workplace relationships*: Bullying can occur at work when there is a consistent lack of information flow between organizational levels and when workers are not involved in decision-making. This is typically an instance of management-level superiors imposing restrictions on lower-level workers.
- c) *Organizational change*: Organizational change brought on by significant internal restructuring and technology development is one of the main causes of bullying at work. The management of a company may implement new policies and choices that affect employees' tasks and responsibilities, which can lead to disagreement and bullying behaviours.
- d) *Work systems*: Bullying among workers can result from the sort of working system in a company that includes; a lack of policies governing employee behaviour, a high rate and intensity of work, staff shortages, interpersonal conflict, organizational limits, role ambiguity, and role conflict.

Stress

Stress is a persistent, complicated emotional state marked by anxiety and is a defining feature of many nerve and mental diseases (Olagunju, 2020). Stress is essentially a person's outward manifestation of how their basic needs are being violated in a world of conflicting demands. It is a person's emotional and physical reaction to perceived demands and difficulties. Stress at

work refers to a pattern of physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses to some of the most taxing features of the nature, structure, and environment of the workplace (Topper, 2016). Kazmi, Amjad and Khan (2018) state that stress is a disturbance or imbalance from one's usual condition that affects one's physical or mental state. It is brought on by upsetting occurrences at work, in social settings, and in daily life (including work, family, and social life), as well as by emotional, psychological, mental, and physical sickness.

Stress results from any scenario or situation that necessitates a behaviour change. Usman and Muhammad (2010) contend that stress is a result of interactions between factors rather than a person's own attitude or environment. It is any demand made on a person by circumstances that are physical, emotional, or mental and necessitate coping mechanisms (Alam, Gouhar & Shafiqur, 2015). Sun and Chiou (2014) posit that it is a negative emotional experience followed by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive, and behavioural changes aimed at either modifying the events or coping with their repercussions. Ayodele (2014) argues that it is a complex triad of physiological and psychological symptoms brought on by a person's struggles during an attempt to adapt to a new environment. As a result, stress may develop whenever an environment threatens to place demands beyond a person's capacity and resources.

Categories of Stress

Stress can be categorized into two types based on its impact on the body mind and performance:

- I. *Eu-stress*: Eu-stress is simply the maximum amount of stress that a person can tolerate. Positive side effects result from this stress. Eu-stress can inspire workaholic behaviour. It might be possible to awaken latent skills and capabilities. It motivates people to engage in novel endeavours. Success may result from such accurately measured stress.
- II. *Distress*: Stress that is too much is called distress. Stress at this level is unhealthy for the person. Distress can have a harmful impact on a person's health and mind. Such tension has negative impacts like heart attack, depression, etc.

Occupational Stress

Some eminent scholars have asserted that occupational stress is an inevitable aspect of the modern day. Occupational stress is a feeling of psychological pressure brought on by encountering various stresses at work (Karasek & Theorell, 2014). It is the culmination of stressful events and circumstances that are connected to one's job (Syed, Muhammad, Aftab Qadir & Shabana, 2013). For instance, one of the work-related stressful situations is when workers are exposed to high pressures or demands in the work environment from one side and have limited time to satisfy such needs from the other side. Stress situations at work are caused by inappropriate demands made by the organization itself (Stojanovic, Milenovi & Markovi, 2018). High levels of organizational politics, demanding organizational cultures, and bad leadership styles are a few of the things that can cause conflict; intensify unhealthy competitiveness among people, and increase stress (Ivancevich, Konapske & Matteson, 2017). Numerous contextual elements, such as a lack of organizational support, job uncertainty, and time constraints, have been identified as enhancers of occupational stress. Employment ambiguity, job conflict, workplace bullying, an excessive workload, an uncontrollable job, and other factors were discussed in Prem, Pakvan, Kubicek and Korunka's (2018) study. The economic crisis, which has a detrimental impact on working conditions and employees' mental and physical health, is another new source of occupational stress (Mucci, Giorgi, Roncaioli, Perez, & Arcangeli, 2016).

Effects of Occupational Stress

Despite being the most intelligent mammal on the planet, according to Cox, Griffiths, and Rial-Gonzales (2019), humans are nonetheless susceptible to the stress that their own organizations cause. Due to the high staff turnover caused by undue stress on employees, this condition is also bad for enterprises. Highly stressed workers elect to skip work to avoid an unpleasant environment in the workplace. When the body is faced with a dangerous or stressful circumstance, it goes through three different phases to battle the stress, which has the following effects:

1. *Alarming stage*: Here, the body gets ready to use its fight-or-flight response. In this state, respiration becomes deeper and faster, blood vessels enlarge, blood pressure rises, and digestion slows down. The body saves energy for a future reaction.
2. *Resistance*: The threat stimuli are still present here. The body strives to lessen the consequences of stress by adjusting to the input. The body defends itself against the threat by using its ability to adapt as a shield.
3. *Exhaustion stage*: In this stage, the body is unable to handle additional stressful stimuli. As a result, the body becomes less capable of adapting and is more vulnerable to the effects of stress.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Person-Environment (P-E) Fit Theory by Lewin (1935) and Murray (1938)

This study was anchored on the Person-Environment (PE) Fit Theory. The person-Environment (PE) account of the stress process stems from the early works and theories of Lewin (1935) and Murray (1938). The person-environment (PE) fit theory's fundamental tenet is that stress results from a mismatch between a person's environment and themselves not from the two elements independently, but rather from how they interact. People experience various strains when they believe their work environments are poor or do not satisfy the requirements, wants, and desires they would like to be satisfied by their jobs. It is, therefore, assumed that these strains have an impact on the health and welfare of the employees. In this context, environmental demands include task needs, role expectations, and organizational and group standards. The individual's aptitudes, talents, training, use of time, and energy to satisfy the demands are all representations of their abilities. According to this theory, tension and the need for coping will more likely develop the bigger the gap between an individual and their surroundings

Empirical Review

Malik and Björkqvist (2019) carried out a study that explored workplace bullying and symptoms of occupational stress, and whether this association is mediated by interpersonal relationships, and moderated by sex and nationality. 610 university teachers in Finland and Pakistan participated in this study. The process program was used to implement a conditional process model. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used in data analysis and findings revealed that family relationships (H2), but not relationships with colleagues (H1), mediated the effect of workplace bullying on occupational stress. Thus, H2, but not H1, was corroborated. H3 and H4 did not receive support. Neither country nor sex moderated the mediating effect of family relationships.

Rai and Agarwal (2016) reported a study on a review and future research directions on workplace bullying among university students. The study included 1095 adults recruited from a pool of first-year university students, organizations, unions, and advertisements on the

internet. The participants in the study represented 52 different nationalities. The study's findings revealed that employers can better address incidents of workplace bullying by taking into account their employees' definitions of bullying and their expectations of how bullying should be handled.

A study on the relationship between workplace bullying and employees' work performance was carried out by Yahaya, Ing, Lee, Yahaya, Boon, Hashim and Taat (2015). To complete the study's objectives, data was collected from 217 employees in an organization. Workplace bullying reliability was 0.923, and work performance was 0.836. Data analysis revealed a positive significant relationship between workplace bullying ($r = 0.513$) and work performance. The independent-sample t-test revealed that there were significant differences between local and foreign employees in workplace bullying and work performance. The outcome was $t(n = 217) = -1.022, p = 0.05$. The study findings indicated that there was contribution for the variables such as person-related bullying towards work performance.

Stress effect on work performance using a quantitative field study was investigated by Alkubaisi (2022) on the Qatari banking sector. The research design used for the respondents was the cross-sectional method, with the spearman correlation adopted in testing hypotheses. Samples of 124 participants were randomly selected from the Qatari banking sector and various statistical analyses were performed on the data. The analysis showed that the unclear role given to the employees and the workload has a direct relationship with work stress. The findings of the study also confirmed that poor working conditions, role ambiguity, workload, and family problems act as a full mediating variable in the relationship between stress and job performance in the Qatari banking sector sample.

Obi (2020) examined the effect of stress on employee productivity in selected manufacturing firms in South-East Nigeria. 1287 employees made up the population of the study from the 15 selected manufacturing firms. Borg and Gall was employed to determine the sample size of 427 respondents. Descriptive statistics, correlation and multiple regression analysis at a 5% level of significance were used to data generated were analyzed. The study findings revealed workplace stress has a significant negative effect on employee productivity in manufacturing firms in South-East Nigeria.

Enyonam, Opoku, Addai and Batola (2017) did a study on the effect of occupational stress on job performance at Aspet A. Company Limited. A descriptive research design was adopted for the research with 109 respondents sampled with the aid of convenience sampling techniques. The study found that stress among employees does enhance their job performance in a positive manner ($r = 0.348, sig. value = 0.000$). It was clear from the findings that there are multiple causes of stress which have physical, emotional and psychological effects on employees at the company. The study revealed that stress relation with workforce marital status, education, and working experience was negative.

The influence of job stress on employee performance in Pakistan by Qadoos, Ayesha, Tayyab, Toqeer and Hafiz (2015) was examined. Researcher-made questionnaires were used to collect and analyze data distributed among the customers of telecommunication service providers in Pakistan. The copies of the questionnaire were self-administered to 200 respondents who completed and received given a response rate of 80% with the non-probability sampling techniques used for the selection of the sample. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product

Moment Correlation and Regression Analysis. The finding indicated that there is a positive moderate relationship existing between job stress and employee performance.

METHODOLOGY

A survey research design was adopted by this study as a result of the characteristics of the study where data was collected from sampled respondents through a questionnaire. This made the survey design the most suitable for the study. The population of the study consist of employees of 25 manufacturing firms from the five south-eastern states, 5 companies each from each state, with a population of 798 employees. The sample size of the study was ascertained using Krejcie and Morgan's 1970 sample size formula, and the sample size was 259. The method of data collection was primary, with a structured questionnaire being the instrument. The questionnaire deployed for this purpose was subjected to face and content validity to ensure that it measured what it intends to measure. The questionnaire was also tested for reliability using the split-half technique, which returned a coefficient of .879 (88%), which is high, and therefore, the questionnaire was deemed consistent enough for the study. The data collected were analyzed using correlation analysis and the hypothesis was tested at a 5% level of significance. A total of 258 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, 240 were collected, but only 220 was used, as 20 copies collected were unusable because of some incompletely filled questionnaire while others were mutilated beyond usage.

Data Analysis

H1: there is a significant relationship between work-related bullying and occupational stress among workers in manufacturing firms in southeast Nigeria.

Table 1
Correlation Analysis for Work-Related Bullying and Occupational Stress

		WRB	OCCSTRE
WRB	Pearson Correlation	1	.918**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	220	220
OCCSTRE	Pearson Correlation	.918**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	220	220

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Keys:

WRB: Work-Related Bullying

OCCSTRE: Occupational Stress

From Table 1, the result of the test of hypothesis one which states that there is a significant relationship between work-related bullying and occupational stress among workers in manufacturing firms in southeast Nigeria is seen. From the Table, the correlation coefficient is .918 and the probability value (p-value) is .000 which is less than the level of significance used (p-value < 0.05). Therefore, the alternate hypothesis is accepted and it is stated that there is a statistically significant relationship between work-related bullying and occupational stress among workers in manufacturing firms in southeast Nigeria. That is, when the work-related bullying employees face in their work increases, the stress employees will have in the organization will also increase, because the relationship is a positive one; an increase in the independent variable (work-related bullying) will also lead to an increase in the dependent variable (occupational stress).

CONCLUSION

Bullying in the workplace is a phenomenon that has generated a lot of attention in the past, as a result of its impact on the performance of the organization in general, through the influence it has on employee well-being and performance. This position is further accentuated in the manufacturing firms in southeast Nigeria, following the findings of the study which shows that work-related bullying affects occupational stress.

Recommendation

Sequel to the finding of the study, the following recommendations are put forward:

- a) That the management of the manufacturing firms should know the threshold of employees' tolerance, so as not to push them to the extent of the employee seeing it as bullying, and therefore, make them more stressed.
- b) There is a need for monitoring interactions and relationships among employees, so as not to allow some groups of employees to bully others, especially when the bullying group has some power over the bullied group.

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