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Guest Editors

Professor Bayode Isaiah Popoola
Department of Educational Foundations and Counselling,
Obafemi Awolowo University
Ile Ife
Nigeria

Professor Olubukola Olakunbi Ojo
Department of Educational Foundations and Counselling,
Obafemi Awolowo University,
Ile Ife
Nigeria

Professor Abiodun Adebayo Adediran
Department of History,
Obafemi Awolowo University,
Ile Ife
Nigeria

ETHICAL ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT, SELF-CONTROL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AS ANTECEDENTS

Ike E. Onyishi
Okpagu A. Michael
Lawrence O. Amazue
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Fabian O. Ugwu
Federal University, Nigeria

Abstract

Ethical behavior in the workplace has continued to attract the interest of researchers and practitioners across the globe. Recently, attention of researchers and education administrators have been drawn to unethical practices among staff of higher institutions in Nigeria, and many have attributed the declining standard of education in the country to inability of university workers to adhere to ethical standards when discharging their duties. This study therefore explores ethical work behavior in a Nigerian university context. Perceived organizational support, self-control and psychological empowerment as predictors of workplace ethical behavior were examined. The participants were teaching and non-teaching staff of a university in southeast, Nigeria. The results of the regression analyses showed that perceived organizational support was a significant predictor of ethical behavior among the participants. Self-control and psychological empowerment were also found to be significant predictors of ethical behavior. The implications of these findings to university management were discussed.

Keywords: Self-control, Ethical behavior, Organizational support, Empowerment, University

Introduction

Education is the bedrock of development in any human society. According to Kazeem and Ige (2010) education is a mechanism through which the society generates ideas and skills required for its survival and sustenance and therefore critical for individual, community and national development. However, the ultimate goal of education, which is to empower the society for the greater good of all, is only possible when the educational system is functional and insulated from practices that undermine this primary function. One major problem that seems to be threatening educational system in Nigeria is the issue of unethical practices among students, teachers and other stakeholders in the education sector.

Ethics is a concept that is difficult to define and there seems to be no general acceptable definition of it. However, what appears to be common about the conceptualization of ethics is that, it has to do with what is good or not good, what is morally right or wrong, what is acceptable in a given environment or not and what is expected or not of a person (Ikechi & Akanwa, 2012). In general terms behaving in an ethical way entails understanding the rights of others and engaging in behaviors that is acceptable by the society and is line with overall equity and fairness recognized in human relations.

In most tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the prevalence of unethical practices by students, academic and non-teaching staff seems high. Although, the impact of such unethical behaviors especially among staff members on the efficiency of our institutions may not have been adequately examined, the declining standard of education in the country could be partly attributed to such behaviors. It is obvious that such undesirable behaviors would have negative impact on learning by the students, growth of the system and overall output.

Generally, an unethical organizational behavior which may be classified as deviant organizational behavior (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Chernyak-Hai, & Tziner, 2014; Levy & Tziner, 2011) or counterproductive work behavior (Ho, 2012) has gained research interest because of its socio-psychological implications to individuals and organizations (Chernyak-Hai, & Tziner, 2014). Such behaviors are defined as "dysfunctional" because they almost invariably violate important

organizational norms and harm organizations in several ways relevant to their goals, employees, procedures, productivity, and profitability (Aubé et al., 2009; Spector & Fox, 2005; Spector, et al., 2006). Employees that display counterproductive workplace behaviors are more likely to develop stress related problems and to resign (O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996), and to experience low self-esteem, increased lack of confidence at work and physical and psychological pains (Griffin, O'Leary, & Collins, 1998).

Based on the negative effects of unethical or counterproductive work behavior to individuals and organizations, previous studies have tried to explore its antecedents. Some of the examined personal and organizational antecedents include employees' personal traits and abilities (e.g., Salgado, Moscoso, & Anderson, 2013), job experiences (e.g., Kulas, McInnerney, DeMuth, & Jadwinski, 2007), work stressors (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), work dissatisfaction (Kulas et al., 2007), and abusive supervision (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). However, limited studies have been done on antecedents of unethical organizational behavior in Nigeria, especially in the education sector. In this study, attempt was made to examine the relationship between both organizational variable such as POS and individual variables such as psychological empowerment and self-control and ethical organizational behavior of employees in a Nigerian university environment.

Perceived Organizational Support and Ethical Behavior

Ethical organizational behavior may be understood within the framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET is based on the premise that in any exchange relationship, the use of a subjective cost-benefit analysis seems critical. According to SET, social relationships are based on the assumption that gestures of goodwill will be reciprocated (Blau, 1964). In a recent meta-analysis, Colquitt et al. (2013) indicated that in the past decade many organizational researches have focused on social exchange as a type of interpersonal relationship, drawing mainly on Blau's (1964) theorizing, and that SET was the dominant approach for examining reactions to support perceptions. The results of the meta-analysis point to strong relationships between support dimensions and indicators of social exchange. Specifically, social exchange variables such as trust, organizational commitment, perceived organizational support, and leader-member exchange, were found to be important to relationships between justice, task performance, and ethical organizational behavior (Colquitt et al., 2013).

Thus, perceived organizational support has been used to illustrate the application of SET in the work environment (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Eisenberger and colleagues suggested that employees form a general belief regarding the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about them. It is reasoned that employees who perceive their organizations as supportive are likely to reciprocate such good gesture by engaging in ethical behaviors. On the other hand, employees who perceive that their organization does not meet the expected obligations would be less satisfied with their jobs and workplace experiences than those who perceive that obligations were fulfilled and are likely to engage in unethical behaviors (Chernyak-Hai, & Tziner, 2014).

Several studies showed that employees who are supported by their organization are satisfied with their job (Tansky & Cohen; 2001), and engenders improvement of positive behaviors and attitudes like affective and normative commitment (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002; Aube et al., 2007) For this reason, it is suggested that perceived organizational support would be positively related to organizational ethical behaviors and negatively related to unethical behaviors.

Thus, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1: Employees' perceptions of overall organizational support will be positively related with ethical organizational behavior - the higher the perceived overall organizational support, the lower the reported unethical organizational behaviors.

Self-control and Ethical Organizational Behavior

In addition to the understanding of the relationship between perceived organizational support and ethical organizational behavior, we sought to examine the relationship between employee level of self-control and ethical organizational behavior. Self-control is "the ability to override or change one's inner responses, as well as to interrupt undesired behavioral tendencies (such as impulses) and

refrain from acting on them” (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004, p. 274). Self-control enables individuals to resist short-term temptations (e.g., the pleasure of using office internet for personal business) to achieve long-term aims (e.g., losing weight; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009).

Self-control has been viewed as a personal resource that is very important in general interpersonal relationship and necessary for avoiding many negative consequences. For instance, research has found that as people use self-control to regulate diet, people use self-control to refrain from engaging in tempting, unethical behavior (Muraven, Poggarsky & Shmueli, 2006). Also, Mead, Baumeister, Schweitzer, & Ariely (2009) found that individuals were more likely to misrepresent their performance for financial gain when their self-control resources were depleted than when they were not. These findings seem to generalize to the workplace. People with high self-control have been found to be less aggressive toward others at work (Latham & Perlow, 1996) and to be less likely to perform counterproductive or deviant work behaviors (Bordia, Restubog, & Tang, 2008). It is therefore reasonable to propose that self-control will be related with ethical organizational behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Employees' level of self-control will be positively associated with ethical organizational behavior - the higher the reported level of self-control, the lower the reported unethical organizational behaviors.

Psychological Empowerment and Ethical Organizational Behavior

Empowerment in the workplace has been viewed as an important mechanism for improving organizational effectiveness (Kanter, 1997; Pfeffer, 1999). Kanter (1977) provides a theoretical explanation for the possible role of empowerment in organizations. Empowerment is at the center of Kanter's (1977) Structural Theory of Power in Organizations. She identifies that structures important to the growth of empowerment are access to information, being provided with the appropriate resources and support to perform required tasks at a high level of achievement, and having access to programs that will enable individuals to develop and enhance their work experience.

Employees can be empowered psychologically through supporting mechanisms such as those that build competencies, motivation, and knowledge sharing, placing employees in control of their work-place destiny (Spreitzer 1996). Thus, psychological empowerment relates to internal beliefs of being in control of one's future, of being able to make choices about how, when and where skills are advanced, and that once advanced, employees are confident that they will be offered opportunities to apply new knowledge. Psychological empowerment has been described as a vehicle for instilling motivated behavior throughout organizations (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), and enhances self worth through identifying and changing the conditions that foster powerlessness. Psychological empowerment emerges where there is clarity in roles and responsibility, a high level of understanding of the purpose and value of work undertaken by an employee in the whole organisational context, competence building, and authority to select and retain work behaviors (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Several researchers have investigated the role of psychological empowerment in many positive job behaviors including proactive behaviors and commitment (Anderson & Williams, 1996). It is believed that the psychological state that empowerment provides, enables empowered employees to engage more in extra-role efforts, act independently, and have high moral commitment to the organization (Spreitzer, 1995). We suggest that since employees who are empowered tend to find meaning in what they do, feel they are in control of their work, feel they have the moral obligations to engage in ethical behaviors and believe that they can as well influence job outcomes, psychological empowerment will also help employees engage more on behaviors that tend to reflect their commitment to the organization.

Reasoning from the job demands-resources model of work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), psychological empowerment could be seen as a resource that could enable an individual to become morally indebted to the organization. Theoretically, Conger and Kanungo (1988) conceptualized empowerment as the motivational concept of self-efficacy and Thomas and Velthouse (1990) view psychological empowerment as intrinsic motivation manifested in four cognitions (meaning, self-determination, competence and impact). According to Spreitzer (1995) these cognitions combine additively to produce an overall feeling of empowerment and reflect an active orientation to work role - an orientation in which an individual wishes and feels able to shape his or her work role and context. Since empowerment has been seen as internal motivational construct of

individual to match on despite the odds, the Self-determination Theory (SDT), which started off with the empirical examination of the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci, 1976) could also be very essential in explaining this relationship. SDT maintains that individuals are endowed with an innate striving to actualize their potentials, that is, to elaborate their knowledge, cultivate their interests, seek challenge and explore the world. The theory suggests that individuals are growth-oriented organisms who actively interact with the environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Employees with self-determination have some control over what they do, how much effort they will put (Spector, 1986). Arguing from a motivational perspective, psychological empowerment could therefore become a resource that enables individuals to engage in ethical organizational behavior.

There is enough evidence that psychological empowerment is positively related to various positive job outcomes such as extra-role behaviors in organization (Onyishi & Ogbodo, 2012), organizational commitment (Manz & Sims, 1993), innovative behavior (Kirkman *et al.* 2004; Mohd *et al.* 2009). It could be reasoned that psychological empowerment could as well be positively related to ethical organizational behavior and negatively related to unethical behavior.

Hypothesis 3: Employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment will be positively related with ethical organizational behavior - the higher the perceived psychological empowerment, the lower the reported unethical organizational behaviors.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Two hundred and twenty four (224) copies of questionnaire were sent to teaching and non-teaching staff of a university in southeast, Nigeria, for completion at their respective offices during working hours. The participants were given a consent form that specified the purpose of the research with information assuring confidentiality of their responses. Participants that accepted to complete the questionnaire were then given a set of the instruments of the study including an area that covered demographic information to complete. Out of the 224 surveys distributed, only 209 copies were completed and returned, representing a return rate of 93.30%. The sample comprised of 113 women and 96 men. Out of the 209 participants, 79 were teaching members of staff while 130 were non-teaching staff. Their age ranged between 22 and 68 years, with a mean age of 43.44 years. The average job tenure was 12.51 years. All the participants volunteered to participate in the study.

Measures

Perceived Organisational Support Scale: Four items from the Survey of Perceived Organisational Support (SPOS) developed by Eisenberger and colleagues (1986) were used to assess participants' perceived organizational support. The four items were selected from the original 30-item questionnaire of Eisenberger and colleagues (1986). Earlier researchers who used the shortened version of SPOS reported high reliability scores (Onyishi & Ogbodo, 2012; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). A sample item in the scale is "The organization really cares about my well-being." The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the present study was .83.

Self-control measure: Self-control was measured with 10-item inventory adapted from the Brief Self Control measure developed by Tangney, Baumeister and Boone (2004). The scale has a 5-point response format ranging from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). A sample item is "I have a hard time breaking bad habits." The scale has high internal consistency. Tangney, Baumeister and Boone (2004) reported Cronbach's alpha of .85 for the scale. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 was reported for the present study.

Psychological Empowerment Scale: Psychological empowerment was assessed with the Spreitzer's (1995) Psychological Empowerment Scale. The scale is a 12-item self-report scale that assesses the four dimensions of empowerment (meaning, competence, self-determination and impact), with a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree with the statement) to 5 (strongly agree with the statement). A sample item is "I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job." The Cronbach's alpha for the present study was .89.

Ethical Behavior Scale: Ethical behavior was measured with the Friedreich's (1993) adapted version of the Ferrel and Skinner (1988) Ethical Behavior Measure. The scale is designed to elicit

information on the amount of duplicity that respondents exhibit in their organizations. Higher scores mean higher level of unethical behavior exhibited. The Chronbach's alpha of the scale for the present study is .92.

Results

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlation among study variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Ethical Behavior	14.75	5.35							
2 Gender			-.09						
3 Age	43.44	9.66	-.22	.09					
4 Marital status			-.35***	.09	.39***				
5 Job Tenure	12.51	9.57	.05	.14*	.66***	.21**			
6 Perceived Organizational Support	13.60	2.78	-.32***	.06	.20**	.00	.04		
7 Self-control	33.93	8.80	-.41***	.20**	-.06	.26***	-.24***	.04	
8 Psychological Empowerment	44.50	8.25	-.32***	.13*	-.06	-.10	-.22***	.46***	.27***

Note. *** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$. A total of 209 employees completed the questionnaires. Gender (1 = Female, 2 = Male); Marital status (1 = single, 2 = married). Ethical behavior, perceived organizational support, self control and empowerment were entered as raw scores.

The results of the correlation analyses show that among the control variables, marital status was shown to be related to ethical behavior. Participants that were single reported engaging in more unethical behavior than their married counterparts. Perceived organizational support had negative relationship with ethical behavior ($r = -.32$ $p < .001$), indicating that the higher the participants level of perceived organizational support, the lower their scores in unethical behavior. Self control was also found to be negatively related to ethical behavior ($r = -.41$ $p < .001$). The result of the correlation analysis also showed that psychological empowerment is negatively and significantly related to ethical behavior ($r = .32$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Hierarchical regression results (N= 367 employees)

Variables	1	2
Gender	-.07	.02
Age	-.32***	-.20*
Marital Status	-.29***	-.25***
Job Tenure	.33***	.14
Perceived organizational support		-.20**
Self-control		-.27***
Psychological Empowerment		-.16*
R ²	.44	.60
R ² Change	.20	.17
F values	F(4,204)=12.51***	F(7,201)=16.36***

Note: *** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$.

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to examine the contributions of, perceived organizational support, self-control, and psychological empowerment on ethical organizational behavior. In the analysis, we first entered the demographic variables (gender, age, marital status, job tenure) in the regression equation as a block. We then entered the independent variables (perceived organizational support, self-control, and psychological empowerment) in the next step of the regression analyses. Among the demographic variables, age ($\beta = -.32$, $p < .001$), marital status ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$), and job tenure ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .001$) contributed significantly to the variance in ethical organizational behavior. As a block, the demographic variables contributed 20% of the variance in ethical organizational behavior. Perceived organizational support was negatively related to unethical organizational behavior ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, the results of the regression analysis demonstrated that self-control is a significant predictor of ethical organizational behavior ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .001$). Also, psychological empowerment significantly predicted ethical organizational behavior ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .05$). The results showed that as a block, perceived organizational support, self-control and psychological empowerment accounted for 16.6% to the unique variance in organizational ethical behavior even when the effects of the demographic variables have been controlled.

Discussion

The results of the study confirmed our proposition that perceived organizational support will be related to organizational ethical orientation. The results demonstrated that employees who perceive their organization as supportive tend to engage in less unethical behavior. Reasoning from the social exchange perspective, employees who perceive their organization as supportive will reciprocate such good gesture from the employer by engaging in more ethical behaviors that support the organization than those who perceive less support from their organizations. This result is consistent with previous findings (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002; Aube et al., 2007) that found perceived organizational support to be significantly related to positive organizational behavior including ethical behavior. This also supports the social exchange explanation of organizational behavior that employees tend to reciprocate good gestures by the organization by engaging in behaviors that benefit the organization. On the other hand, employees who feel supported by the organization also engages in less unethical behavior as a compensation to the perceived support received from the organization.

Another aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that self-control will be related with organizational ethical behavior. The result of the study provided support that self-control is an important factor in organizational ethical behavior. Earlier studies have also shown that self-control is a significant factor in positive psychological adjustment (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). We can also explain this result from the general self-control theory of crime, which explains criminal behaviors based on presence of absence of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The theory of self-control argues that the developmental and environmental conditions, such as nurturing and limit setting, shape individuals' impulsivity, low frustration tolerance and need for immediate gratification. In other words, self-control is the individual's ability to consider long-term consequences before satisfying his or her needs. This is consistent with Douglas and Martinko (2001) view that people with low self-control react impulsively to provocations because they have lost their inhibitions to resist pressures. The results of this study is understandable if we are to take cognizance of the fact that people who have high self-control tend to restrict themselves from engaging in behaviors that would predispose them to feeling of guilt (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Engagement in unethical behaviors will likely predispose individuals to feeling of guilt of which individuals with high self-control would not likely do.

Our proposition that psychological empowerment will be related to ethical organization was also confirmed. The data showed that perceived psychological empowerment is negatively related to organizational unethical behavior. Psychological empowerment as earlier conceptualized relates to internal beliefs of being in control of one's future, and this belief enables the individual to engage in behaviors that they judge to be beneficial to themselves and others. Scholars have argued that psychological empowerment enhances self worth and serves as a vehicle for instilling motivated behavior in work organizations (Conger and Kanungo 1988). From a theoretical angle, the result of our study could be explained from the job demands-resources model of work behavior (Schaufelind & Bakker, 2004). In this sense, psychological empowerment could be seen as a resource that could enable an individual to become morally indebted to the organization, and this feeling of indebtedness enables the individual to engage more in behavior that supports the organization and less in behaviors

that harm the organization. It is therefore likely that empowered employees find meaning in what they do, are self-determined, and feel that they have impact on what goes on in their workplaces. For these reasons, they are likely to engage less in unethical behavior at their places of work.

Implications of the Study

University education no doubt is critical for development of any country. University employees are important stakeholders in any university. It is therefore important to investigate factors that militate or facilitate their job performances. The findings that perceived organizational support is an important variable in ethical or unethical behavior of university employees have a lot of implications for managing our universities. It would be logical to suggest that university administrators in the country should begin to develop strategies of evolving workplace support programs that would enable workers feel that they are supported by the universities. The feelings of support would propel members of staff of the universities to reciprocate the good treatment by the employing universities by engaging in ethical behaviors that would enable the universities to deliver their mandates.

The findings that self-control is an important antecedent of ethical organizational behavior points to the direction that enhancing employees level of self-control is relevant in reducing unethical behaviors among university workers. Training programs and campaigns targeted at increasing level of self-control of employees is recommended.

Psychological empowerment was linked to ethical organizational behavior. Psychological empowerment enables individual to feel that they have a stake or impact on what happens in their organization. Psychological empowerment removes feelings of powerlessness from employees, and their removal helps employees to engage in behavior that benefits them and their organizations. Thus, organizational environment that enhances employee' feeling of empowerment is vital in reducing negative job behaviors such as unethical practices.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Quality university education holds the key to accelerated socio-economic development in Nigeria. University employees are very vital instrument in ensuring quality university education in Nigeria. The result of the present study that linked perceived organizational support, self-control and psychological empowerment to ethical organizational behavior of university employees calls for more research attention to these areas. It also calls for practical interventions in managing our university systems. Workplace employee support and empowerment initiatives that would enable university workers to perceive the workplace to be supportive and make them develop feelings that they have what it takes to contribute meaningfully and positively to the growth of our university are desirable. It is also hoped that such initiatives would help employees develop the required level of self-control that would help them become resistant to pressure of engaging in unethical behavior at work.

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Author Information

Ike E. Onyishi

ikeonyishi@yahoo.com
ernest.onyishi@unn.edu.ng

Okpagu A. Michael

Lawrence O. Amazue
Department of Psychology
University of Nigeria
Nsukka

and

Fabian O. Ugwu

Department of Psychology
Faculty of Humanities & the Social Sciences
Federal University
Ndufu-Alike
Ikwo
Ebonyi State
fabian.ugwu@gmail.com