



COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOUR IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL SERVICE: DO SELF-CONTROL, PERCEIVED ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT, AND OCCUPATIONAL STRESS MATTER?

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ABSTRACT

Organisational behaviours are generally expected to be mutual between the management and employees. But the reality of life in organisations is that there are situations when this mutual respect is violated. When employees perceive any violation or unfair treatment by the organisation, trust is lost which may consequently initiate several undesirable job behaviours in a way to reciprocate the mistreatment. One way that employees repay the organisation that treats them unfairly is through engagement in counterproductive work behaviour (CWB). The present study therefore examined the predictive value of self-control, perceived organisational support (POS), and occupational stress on CWB among employees in the Nigerian civil service organisations. Cross-sectional data were collected from employees (N = 367) through random sampling technique across seven ministries within the South-eastern Nigeria. Consistent with all our speculations, the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated that high self-control and POS significantly and negatively predicted CWB. Occupational stress was a significant positive predictor of CWB. The implications of the study were discussed, limitations were highlighted, and suggestions for future studies were provided.

Keywords: counterproductive work behaviour, Nigerian civil service, occupational stress, perceived organisational support, self-control

INTRODUCTION

The behaviours that employees often emit tend to be a reflection of what they experience in their organisation. One way the employees respond to stressful conditions that emanate from the management, job tasks or mistreatment is to engage in counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) (Meisler et al., 2020; Pindek & Spector, 2016). CWB is defined as intended to undermine the attainment of organisations' set goals and at the same time leave negative impact on members (Fox et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2021). This employee retaliatory response is usually detrimental to both the organisation and co-workers (Borman et al., 2001; Shoss et al., 2016). It can manifest in various forms, including theft, fraud, absenteeism, physical aggression, substance use and abuse (Marcus & Schuler, 2004), which expose organisations to huge losses (Braun et al., 2016).

Over the past few decades there have been emergence of both personal and organisational resources that impact on CWB. Among these personal variables that have been linked to different areas of organisational studies is self-control due to its positive impact in overall human functioning (de Ridder et al., 2012). Perceived organisational support (POS) has also received significant amount of interest of researchers due to its motivating potentials. The impact of perceived support could be better appreciated considering the importance of the social exchange theory in work organisation where the organisation and employees are guided by the principle of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). However, occupational stress which is a fact of organisational life has been negatively linked to numerous desirable organisational behaviours (e.g., Mensah, 2021; Ngirande, 2021) has at the same time been positively related to undesirable job behaviours and outcomes (Cho & Yang, 2018; De Clercq et al., 2021). There has been recent



explosion of studies on CWB but unfortunately these studies were predominantly conducted in Western-European and Asian environments (e.g., Meisler et al., 2020; Uche et al., 2017), which are notably different from Nigeria (Hofstede et al., 2010). Depending on foreign data will obscure comprehensive understanding of the relationships among these variables. Although studies that considered CWB have been conducted in Nigerian government employees (e.g., Akinsola & Alarape, 2019; Kadiri & Umemezia, 2019), but none of these studies focused on self-control, POS, and organisational stress as predictors of CWB. It therefore becomes important to explore the relevance of these variables to extend the understanding of these relationships.

Self-control and CWB

Self-control refers to individuals' ability to dominate or nullify desirable behaviour while working toward achieving long-term goals (de Ridder et al., 2012; Situ et al., 2016). Individuals who have higher levels of self-control tend to have better control over their emotions and as a result experience more positive outcomes and fewer negative outcomes (e.g., Tangney et al., 2004; Walters, 2016; Wolfe et al., 2016). Self-control emanates from the general theory of crime, which explains criminal behaviours based on the theory of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The theory of self-control argues that individuals' impulsivity, low frustration tolerance and inability to postpone gratification are shaped by the forces of development and environment. However, the organisational and social psychology literatures document that individual differences largely explain individuals' involvement in various forms of CWBs. Focusing on CWB is important because it is responsible for several negative implications both for organisations and employees (Banks et al., 2012). For example, CWB destabilize the internal activities of organisations leaving negative effects on productivity, employee performance evaluation and career development (De Clercq et al., 2019). However, efforts have been made to relate various forms of personality traits to CWB such as negative affectivity (e.g., Hepworth & Towler, 2004), emotional stability (Colbert et al., 2004; Salgado, 2002), agreeableness (Skarlicki et al., 1999), self-esteem (Harvey & Keashley, 2003), and trait anxiety (Fox & Spector, 1999). Low self-control has also been associated with CWB (e.g., Douglas & Martinko, 2004; Wang et al., 2021). When self-control is low, individuals find it difficult to effectively manage their frustrations. Instead, they lose their inhibitions and therefore react impulsively or aggressively to provocations (Douglas & Martinko, 2001). Despite that the relationship between self-control and CWB has attracted reasonable amount of research interests; this relationship has not been sufficiently explored among Nigerian public servants. In consideration of the argument above, we state that:

Hypothesis 1: Self-control negatively predicts CWB among employees in the Nigerian civil service organisations.

POS and CWB

Another variable different from self-control but which has attracted great interest of researchers is POS. POS refers to individuals' conviction that the organisation can positively or negatively influence employees and these employees can recognize this influence and may adequately reciprocate to any form of these influences. POS is used to gauge how organisations treat its employees in terms of appreciating and supporting their work roles. Studies (e.g., Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Karatepe & Mehmet, 2016; Kurtessis et al., 2015) argued that when managers value employees' work efforts and show caring attitudes toward the employees such as being attentive to their complaints, support them, treat them fairly and with kindness, enabling work environment is created. Consistent with the principle of norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), these employees are obligated to contribute to the development of the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). According to the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), POS, may engender positive emotion on the employees which makes it obligatory to shun negative behaviours and embrace positive ones.



POS has shown to be related to a variety of work-related attitudes and outcomes. When employees perceive that the organisation cares about their welfare and supports the work they do, these employees will more likely reciprocate by being more engaged in their work (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2014; Musenze et al., 2020). Increased commitment, performance, and job satisfaction have also been identified as outcomes of employees' perception of organisational support (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Karatepe & Mehmet, 2016; Kurtessis et al., 2015). POS has been abundantly related to job satisfaction (Erdogan & Enders, 2007; Filipova, 2010). Similar relationship was also observed in a longitudinal study (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998). However, reverse could be the case when employees perceive low support from their organisation. However, despite providing an explanation for the link between the organisation and employees, to date, the direct relationship between perceived organisational support and CWB of public servants is lacking. It therefore makes sense to propose that:

Hypothesis 2: POS negatively predicts CWB among employees of the Nigerian civil service.

Occupational stress and CWB

Numerous researchers (e.g., Fida et al., 2015; Ma & Li, 2019; Meisler et al., 2020; Sprung & Jex, 2012) have described CWB as an emotion-based response to stressful organisational conditions. This view suggests that individuals monitor and evaluate events in their work environments (Lazarus, 1991). Some of these events may be evaluated as job stressors, which includes role conflict and ambiguity (Mañas et al., 2018), interpersonal conflict (Sonnentag & Unger, 2013), and situational constraints (Pindek & Spector, 2016). These stressors induce negative emotional responses, such as anger or anxiety (Cooper, 2018). Stress is identified as the cause of negative psychological, behavioral, and physiological outcomes (Musyoka et al., 2012). It impedes motivation, morale, and performance of employees in the workplace (Saleem et al., 2021). Organisational stress is related to negatively to job satisfaction because it depletes individuals' energy resources that results in lower levels of job performance (Ram et al., 2011). More so, when these resources are lost frustration tend to result which may further lead to engagement in CWB (e.g., Ma & Li, 2019; Suroso et al., 2020) have linked work stress with CWB.

It has been argued that employees engage in CWB as a coping mechanism with stressful conditions and negative events, which is expected to improve their negative emotions (Reynolds et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021). Studies have indicated that job stress can have some implications such as job dissatisfaction or turnover intention, somatic symptoms such as headache, physiological changes such as increased blood pressure, and longterm pathology (Ahn & Chaoyu, 2019; Arshadi & Damiri, 2013). Job stress has also been found to negatively associate with poor mental well-being (Mensah, 2021), job performance (Yunita & Saputra, 2019). Studies (e.g., Burke, 2017; Haque et al., 2018; Ngirande, 2021; Slade et al., 2016) have shown that stress has serious organisational costimplications such as reduced organisational commitment. These studies were conducted in business organisations in more developed societies. There is a need to conduct similar study in non-profit driven organisations such as the Nigerian civil service. Thus, it is hypothesise that:

Hypothesis 3: Occupational stress positively predicts CWB among employees of the Nigerian civil service.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The participants ($N = 367$) for the study were randomly selected. They were employees working in state government ministries in Enugu State, southeastern Nigeria. The researcher and five



trained research assistants contacted the employees at their workplaces after obtaining the approval of the head of administration in each of the ministries. Seven out of the 25 ministries in the state were selected through the simple random sampling and all the full-time employees in the selected ministries were sampled. A statement that asked the participants to indicate their willingness to participate in the study was included in the questionnaire. Those who were interested to participate checked the box to give their consent. Out of the 367 employees that participated in the study, 233 (63.49%) of the participants were male, while 134 (36.51%) were female employees. Two hundred and sixty-eight (268) of the participants were married while 99 were single. The participants' age ranged from 23 years to 59 years with mean age of 39.12 years. The minimum educational qualifications of the participants was secondary (high) school certificate. The respondents were asked to fill the questionnaire copies at a time that best suits them within their working periods. The questionnaires were administered to volunteer employees only. After words, the researcher and the assistants went round to the various departments to collect the completed copies. They returned that next day to collect from respondents that were not able to complete the first day. A total of 447 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the employees in all the ministries sampled but, a total of 377 copies of the questionnaire were returned representing a return rate of 84%. Of this number returned, 10 were discarded due to improper completion and 367 copies only were used for data analysis.

Instruments

Self-control. Self-control scale developed by Grasmick et al. (1993) was used to measure employees' self-control in the organisation. It is a 24-item scale that followed the 4-point Likert-type response format that ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. The scale is composed of six dimensions of self-control such as impulsivity, simple task, risk taking, physical activities, self-centredness, and temper. Sample items include: "I often act on the spur of the moment without stopping to think" (impulsivity), "When things get complicated, I tend to quit or withdraw" (simple task), "I find no excitement in doing things for which I might get in trouble" (risk taking), "If I had a choice, I would almost always rather do something mental than something physical" (physical activities), "If things I do upset people, it's their problem not mine" (self-centredness), and "I don't lose my temper very easily" (temper). Cronbach's alpha of .83 was established of the instrument was established for the present study. This scale demonstrated high Cronbach's alpha among government employees in Nigeria. Higher scores indicate lack of self-control.

Perceived organisational Support. A short version of Eisenberger et al. (1986) perceived organisational support scale was used to examine perceived support the organisations. It is an 18-item scale designed in a 5-point Likert-type structure ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Some of its items were positively stated, while others were negatively stated. Sample items include: "The organisation values my contribution to its wellbeing" (positive) and "The organisation fails to appreciate any extra effort from me" (negative). Cronbach's alpha of .90 of the instrument was established for the present study. Higher scores in the scale indicate higher perceived support.

Occupational Stress. The Role-based stress inventory developed by Rizzo et al. (1970) was used to measure stress level among employees in the organisations. It is a 23-item instrument designed in a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Sample item include: "I have enough time to complete my work", and "I perform tasks that are too easy or boring". Cronbach's alpha of .78 of the scale was obtained for the present study. Higher scores in the scale indicate higher occupational stress.

Counterproductive Work Behaviour. Counterproductive work behaviour scale developed by Fox and Spector (1999) was used to measure counterproductive work behaviours exhibited by the employees of the organisations. It is 34-item scale, participants were requested to indicate how often (1 = never to 4 = everyday) they engage in certain activities, such as “made fun of someone at work”. The scale is made up of 5 dimensions of counterproductive work behaviour such as sabotage, withdrawal, production deviance, theft, and abuse. Cronbach’s alpha of .83 of the scale was obtained for the present study. Higher scores indicate high CWB.

RESULTS

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis for the current study are presented below.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlation between study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 CWB	62.74	8.65	1						
2 Gender	-	-	-.23***	1					
3 Marital status	-	-	-.09*	.14**	1				
4 Age	39.12	7.17	-.08	.01	-.07	1			
5 Self control	53.03	6.65	-.24***	.07	-.05	.02	1		
6 POS	52.85	7.71	-.15**	.01	-.02	.01	.13**	1	
7 Occupational Stress	63.23	8.67	.21***	-.02	.07	-.04	-.10	-.09*	1

Note:*** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$. A total of 367 employees completed the questionnaires. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female); Marital status (1 = single, 2 = married). CWB = Counterproductive work behaviour, self control, POS = perceived organisational support, and occupational stress were entered as they were reported.

The results of the descriptive statistics in Table 1 above showed that gender was significantly and negatively related to CWB ($r = -.23$ $p < .001$). Male respondents reported engaging in higher counterproductive work behaviours than their female CWB. Marital status was significantly and negatively related to CWB ($r = -.09$ $p < .05$), with single respondents reporting higher CWB than those who are married. Self- control was also found to be negatively related to CWB ($r = -.24$ $p < .001$). Perceived organisational support had negative relationship with CWB ($r = -.15$ $p < .01$), while stress was positively related to CWB ($r = .21$, $p < .001$).

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

Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Gender	-.23**	-.21**	-.21**	-.20**
Marital status	-.06	-.07	-.08	-.09
Age	-.08	-.07	-.07	-.06
Self control		-.23**	-.21**	-.20**
Perceived organisational support			-.12*	-.10*
Occupational stress				.18**
R ²	.06	.10	.12	.15
R ² Change	.06	.05	.07	.09
F Change	8.25	6.31	9.42	15.33



F values	F(3,363) = 8.25**	F(4,362) = 11.91**	F(5,361) = 10.74**	F(6,360) = 11.37**
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Note: ** = $p < .001$; * = $p < .05$

Table 2 above showed the results of the hierarchical regression analysis that examined the contributions of gender, marital status, age, self-control, perceived organisational support, and stress on CWB. However, among the control variables (gender, age, and marital status) only gender contributed significantly to CWB. As a block, the control variables contributed 6% of the variance in CWB. The results showed that self-control negatively predicted CWB ($\beta = -.23, p < .001$). Self-control contributed 10% to the unique variance in CWB over and above the control variables. This result confirms our hypothesis that self-control will negatively predict CWB. Perceived organisational support was also found to negatively predict CWB ($\beta = -.12, p < .05$). Perceived organisational support contributed an additional 12% of the variance in CWB over and above the control variables and self-control. Furthermore, the results of the hierarchical regression demonstrated that occupational stress positively predicted CWB ($\beta = .18, p < .001$); however, occupational stress accounted for 15% of the variance in CWB over and above the control variables, self-control, and perceived organisational support.

DISCUSSION

The current study explored the predictive value of self-control, perceived organisational support, and occupational stress on CWB among civil service employees in Nigeria. The results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that self-control was a negative predictor of CWB, which supports the first hypothesis of the study. The reason for this finding could be that when individuals dominate their emotion, they tend to be stable which caused them to have enough personal resources not to engage in CWB despite any adverse work experience they may have received from their organisations. In an organisational setting such as the Nigerian civil service that is viewed to be characterized by high level of bureaucratic corruption e.g., nepotism, the contributions of self-control in CWB behaviours such as theft, bribe taking, and other destructive organisational behaviours seem obvious. In such environment temptation to engage in such unwholesome practices is high, and therefore, self-control becomes extremely important in shielding individuals from any form of retaliatory behaviours. This finding tends to be consistent with previous studies (e.g., Douglas & Martinko, 2004; Hofmann et al., 2014; Marcus & Schuler, 2004; Wang et al., 2021) which found that lack of self-control is associated with CWB.

The results of this study also showed that POS is a significant negative predictor of CWB. The finding supports our hypothesis 2 and could be explained on the basis of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). At the heart of the social exchange theory is the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) that two parties and in this context the organisation and the employees involved in a social exchange relationship stick to norms specifying that good deeds should be reciprocated based on mutual trust and beliefs that the other party will uphold their obligations as well (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This implies that employees who feel that they are supported by the organisation repay the good gesture by resolving not to engage in CWB. This finding tends to support previous studies (e.g. Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Kurtessis et al., 2015; Karatepe & Mehmet, 2016) which demonstrated that POS is positively related to many beneficial job outcomes. Furthermore, occupational stress was found to be a positive predictor of CWB. This finding is consistent with hypothesis 3 of the current study and tends to agree with previous studies (e.g., Burke, 2017; Haque et al., 2018; Ngirande, 2021; Slade et al., 2016) which demonstrated that job stress is positively related with numerous negative job behaviours including CWB (Ma & Li, 2019; Suroso et al., 2020). This finding could be a response of employees who are perhaps frustrated by the enormous stress experienced at their workplace. This stress may be in the form of poor salary scale that is characteristic of various states in Nigeria including Enugu, abusive supervision, or harassment from imperious bosses. This finding is in line with



previous studies (e.g., Saleem et al., 2021), which stated that stress hampers motivation and dampens employee morale, which create frustration due to depletion individuals' energy resources (Ram et al., 2011) and this may in turn cause these individuals to act in counterproductive ways.

Implications of the study

The results of the present study have implications for theory and practice. First, they extend the utility of the SET in describing the nature of the relationship evident in the Nigerian civil service organisation. The results of the study also highlight the relevance of the self-control theory in eliciting behaviour that is vital to the survival of organisations. The results of the present study also added to the existing literature by demonstrating that self-control and POS negatively predicted CWB among civil service employees. This implies that these two behaviours should be made priorities in the work life of civil servants for organisations to be able to achieve set goals. Since the experience of organisational stress positively predicted CWB, managers should strive to ensure that employee felt stress is reduced and this could be achieved through providing adequate support that will lift the burden off their shoulders and give meaning to their work lives.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future studies

Although this study is one of the first attempts to examine the antecedents of CWB among employees in the Nigerian civil service, it has some limitations. In the study, only few of the possible antecedents of CWB were examined. It is possible that the prevailing culture in different organisations may predispose employees to engage in CWB. In a situation where there is high level of corruption as evidenced in the Nigerian civil service (Obi et al., 2019; Salihu, 2020), without any sign of workable solution, engagement in CWB may become an offshoot of such culture of corruption. It is therefore important that future researchers explore the role organisational culture plays in CWB. Data collected for the study were through self-report, which is often associated with inability to establish causation, future studies should consider data from other sources such as from supervisors or co-workers to be able to reduce common-method bias. The current author also advocates that, future studies should utilize longitudinal data to be able to generalize the findings to wide workforce and at the same time establish causation.

In conclusion, the research showed that self-control, POS, and organisational stress are critical factors in CWB. This indicates that both personal and organisational variables are important in the understanding of why employees refuse to take retaliatory behaviours against their organisation and/or co-workers working in the same organisation. It is expected that this study will generate more research that examines other personal and organisational factors in CWB in both profit and non-profit organisations.

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