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BEYOND THE UNIFORM: CLIMATE OF FEAR, PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGFULNESS AND WORK ENGAGEMENT AMONG NIGERIAN POLICE CADETS

Abu Salawu Hassan, Ike E. Onyishi, Victor Ikechukwu Uka,
&
JohnBosco Chika Chukwuorji

¹Department of Psychology, Nigeria Police Academy, Wudil, PMB 3474, Kano, Nigeria.

²Department of Psychology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka 410001, Enugu state, Nigeria.

³CS Mott Department of Public Health, Michigan State University, Flint Michigan, USA.

Corresponding author: JohnBosco Chika Chukwuorji, Department of Psychology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka 410001, Enugu state, Nigeria. Email: johnbosco.chukwuorji@unn.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

Work engagement is a critical factor in job performance, well-being, and professional development in all occupational settings. In law enforcement environments which are often characterized by high stress, limited resources, and hierarchical structures, understanding what drives or hinders work engagement of police cadets is essential for improving training outcomes, maintaining institutional effectiveness, sustaining and long-term career satisfaction. However, little research exists on work engagement in public safety outfits and law enforcement agencies. Our study investigated climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness as emerging factors influencing work engagement of Nigerian police cadets ($N = 798$, 68.3% male, mean age = 20.62). They completed the Climate of Fear Questionnaire (CFQ), Psychological Meaningfulness Scale, and Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-17). Results of a hierarchical multiple regression revealed that those with higher climate of fear ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$) and higher psychological meaningfulness ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) reported increased work engagement. The two predictors collectively explained 51% of the variance in work engagement. While fear is characterized by punitive measures, in training in environments marked by strict discipline and hierarchical control, it may serve as a motivator that enhances work engagement. A balance of fear-based motivation with initiatives promoting purposeful work experiences in police training programs is needed to enhance engagement and institutional effectiveness. More research to unravel how, when and why climate of fear alongside the sense of meaning at work influences work engagement is crucial for informing healthier institutional policies, enhancing police cadet's performance and promoting their general well-being.

Keywords: Law enforcement, motivation, national security, police, stress, work engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian Police Force (NPF) is constitutionally mandated to protect lives and property, prevent crime, and enforce laws (Nigeria Police Act [NPA], 2020). Nigeria has a federal police system whereby officers and men of the Nigerian police are primarily in charge of role security and law enforcement in all 36 Nigerian states and the country's Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The police academy is a fundamental component of the police institution that offers degree courses which focuses on learning, research and critical work training. Upon graduation from the Academy, the police cadets are commissioned to the rank of Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP). During their training, the institution expects them to get properly engaged both in academic work and some professional responsibilities.

The contemporary changing workplace and workforce, along with the emergence of positive psychology and the need to connect work to the whole person, created the focus on work engagement (Nagaprakash et al., 2025). The performance, achievement, productivity and wellbeing of police cadets are subsumed in their work engagement (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). In Kahn's (1990) seminal paper, work engagement is the "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles: in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, emotionally and mentally during role performances" (p. 694). Work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour (energy, mental resilience and persistence despite difficulties at work), dedication (extent of involvement, commitment and pride in one's work), and absorption (being fully concentrated and engrossed in one's work) (Schaufeli et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2002). In the present context, work engagement is the extent of energetic involvement of police cadets in work role training with a sense of interest, pride, and happiness. The starting point of work engagement is the individual's

personal experience, and it is typically an active work-related psychological state that includes perceptions, emotions, and behavioural dispositions, with the features of energy and involvement (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Engaged personnel exhibit energy, commitment, and resilience, which are crucial in high-stress professions like policing (Simon & Aruoren, 2024).

In formulating a synthetic and integrated model of work engagement, Schaufeli and colleagues contended that work engagement is the mental state that results from the behavioural investment of one's own energy, not the behaviour itself or the attitudes that go along with it (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Schaufeli et al.'s work engagement model proposes that work engagement arises from the interplay between job resources, personal resources, and motivational processes (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). Guided by this theory and other similar perspectives, researchers have identified several factors that contribute to work engagement among different occupational groups in the Nigerian public sector such as job satisfaction (Ojeleye & Jada, 2022), workplace incivility (Kareem et al., 2023), abusive supervision, perception of strengths use and strong promotion focus (Idike et al., 2020), support networks and role clarity (Ojeleye et al., 2023; Okolo et al., 2022), person-job fit and workload (Ugwu & Onyishi, 2020), alcohol use (Onyishi & Ugwu, 2012), self-efficacy (Akinbobola & Okonkwo, 2019), and job resources (Adebayo & Ogunsina, 2017).

In the Nigeria private sector, some of the notable factors influencing work engagement include leadership style (Owolabi, 2025), work-life conflict (Balogun et al., 2020), work-life balance (Oludayo et al., 2018), financial incentives (Olowookere et al., 2015), psychological safety (Okurame & Balogun, 2019). Other identified factors include workplace boredom, cyberloafing and mindfulness (Mustapha et al., 2024), job insecurity and supervisor incivility (Ugwu et al., 2022), work family conflict and organizational citizenship behaviour (Onyishi et al., 2024), job demands, perceived transformational leadership behaviour and job crafting (Ojedokun & Idemudia, 2016; Ugwu & Legbeti, 2022). Some other studies have been conducted among Nigerian teachers indicating the roles of compensation (Isah et al., 2022), organizational frustration and sense of calling (Ugwu & Onyishi, 2017), religious commitment (Adeyemi & Olasupo, 2020), social support (Nwokeoma et al., 2020), and home demand (Ugwu et al., 2023) in work engagement. In a study among Nigerian police officers, organizational justice predicted work engagement (Okonkwo & Eze, 2018).

However, despite the growing literature on work engagement in Nigeria, two critical variables that have not been examined in relation to work engagement are climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness. Climate of fear refers to a persistent emotional atmosphere where individuals feel unsafe, anxious, or threatened, often due to real or perceived risks (Kachanoff et al., 2021). This psychological state can be cultivated by institutions, leaders, media, or traumatic events, and is linked to increased stress, compliance, social withdrawal, and impaired mental health (Kachanoff et al., 2021). In such environments, people may self-censor, avoid challenges, or disengage from civic and social responsibilities, contributing to long-term psychological and societal consequences. Fear can act as a motivator but may also hinder psychological safety, a prerequisite for engagement (Kahn, 1990). Climate of fear, characterized by punitive measures such as dismissal or demotion, may influence cadets' work engagement.

Based on Schaufeli's integrative model of work motivation and engagement, we can infer that climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness may influence work engagement among police cadets in Nigeria through both motivational processes and personal resource development. A culture of fear, which is frequently fostered by extreme disciplinary practices, punitive supervision, or psychological threats, may hinder performance in occupational settings. Schaufeli's model suggests that by endangering psychological safety and liberty, such demands might erode intrinsic motivation. Workers' emotional investment and excitement may be diminished when they believe their surroundings are motivated by fear, which may ultimately result in a reduced work engagement.

Ashkanasy and Nicholson (2003) identified fear-inducing practices (e.g., punitive leadership, inconsistent policies) as detrimental to engagement, linking them to reduced

communication and employee withdrawal. Akanni (2019) echoed these findings in Nigerian workplaces, revealing that fear climates suppress creativity and initiative, indirectly eroding engagement. Schaufeli and Bakker (2002) found that prolonged exposure to fear correlates with burnout, which inversely impacts engagement dimensions like vigour and dedication. However, Bakker and Leiter (2010) cautioned that mild stress might transiently motivate but it is chronic fear that undermines psychological safety, a critical enabler of sustained engagement. Whether climate of fear serves as a hindrance demand to impede work engagement or a motivational factor that increases work engagement of Nigerian police cadets remains unknown. Hence the need for the current study.

Contrary to climate of fear, the feeling that one's job has meaning and purpose, known as psychological meaningfulness, serves as a powerful intrinsic motivator and personal resource. Psychological meaningfulness refers to the amount of significance a job has for the individual (Rosso et al., 2010). Individuals experience psychological meaningfulness at work when they experience that they are receiving a return on investment of the self in terms of physical, emotional, and/or cognitive rewards (Rothman & Hamukang'andu, 2013). In an organization, people are most likely to experience psychological meaningfulness when they feel they are useful, valuable and worthwhile (May et al., 2004). Schaufeli's model states that people are more likely to feel enthusiastic, committed, and absorbed - all important markers of engagement - when they find meaning in their work. Police cadets' participation can be increased even in difficult situations if they believe they are helping to create a just, equitable and safe society.

Kahn's (1990) landmark study maintains that psychological meaningfulness is a prerequisite for engagement, arguing that employees invest their cognitive, emotional, and physical energies into roles they deem significant. Work roles and activities which are aligned with individuals' self-concepts are associated with more psychologically meaningful work experiences, which also impact individuals' work engagement positively (Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013). When workers perceive their roles as meaningful, they are more likely to engage deeply (Rosso et al., 2010). In their study, May et al. (2004) demonstrated that employees who perceive their work as meaningful exhibit heightened engagement, driven by factors such as role alignment and autonomy. Psychological meaningfulness predicted work engagement among Malaysian university administrators (Ruslan et al., 2014). Research in Nigeria has also shown a positive link between psychological meaningfulness and work engagement of schoolteachers (Ugwu & Onyishi, 2018) as well as other wellbeing outcomes in several populations (Chukwuorji et al., 2019, Chukwuorji et al., 2024).

Past research has not examined the extent to which the postulations of Schaufeli's model regarding psychological meaningfulness applies in the law enforcement work setting. Theoretically, a climate of fear may reduce engagement at work by interfering with motivational pathways, but psychological meaningfulness increases engagement by bolstering intrinsic motivation and personal resources. An understanding of both pathways may enable institutions create training settings that lessen anxiety and increase a sense of purpose, which would foster sustained engagement at work. Enhancing police cadets' engagement during training is critical for improving institutional effectiveness because public perception of the police as a public service institution in Nigeria often reflects dissatisfaction, attributed partly to inadequate training and poor human resource management (Maduka, 2014; Ojo, 2014).

Due to the notable contributions of work engagement to organisational success, it is critical for researchers and practitioners to understand whether contextual factors (e.g., climate of fear) and personal factors (e.g., psychological meaningfulness) influence work engagement in the Nigerian police training context. The present study extends prior results by investigating the contributions of climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness to work engagement of Nigerian Police cadets – a context that has been neglected in existing research. We hypothesized that (1) Police cadets with high climate of fear will report less work engagement. (2) Police cadets who perceive their work as psychologically meaningful will reported increased work engagement.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 798 police cadets (68.3% male, 31.7% female) from the Nigeria Police Academy, Kano. At the institution, academic courses are available in the sciences (including social sciences), law, social management and humanities. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 25 years (Mean age = 20.62, $SD = 2.05$). Their ethnic groups included Hausa (42.9%), Igbo (27.3%), Yoruba (21.8%), and other ethnic groups (8.8%). By religious affiliations, there were Christians (50.4%), Muslims (46.2%), and cadets from other religious groups (3.4%). Participants were in Regular Course 3 (RC3; 3.6%), RC4 (9.8%), RC5 (19.0%), RC6 (29.6%), and RC7 (38.0%). Participants were approached by the one of the researchers in their classrooms and requested to participate in the study. Police cadets who consented to take part in the study were given the questionnaire for completion while those who declined to take part in the study were allowed to stay in the classroom while others filled the questionnaire. The completed questionnaires were returned to the researcher. There was no incentive for participation in the study. The researcher verbally appreciated the respondents for their time and effort in completing the questionnaire. Approval for this study was obtained from the psychology research ethics committee of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Measures

Climate of Fear Questionnaire (CFQ)

The 13-item CFQ (Ashkanasy & Nicholson, 2003) is designed to measure frequent feeling of fear in a given group usually as result of actions taken by leaders. Items were rated in a 7-point scale format ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). Examples of items include: *I feel anxious about speaking up in this organisation because you have to be able to prove all your remarks; I feel afraid at work because management comes down hard on mistakes as an example to others.* Ashkanasy and Nicholson (2003) reported a Cronbach's α of .93 and established convergent validity with measures of workplace anxiety and distrust ($r = .79$). They demonstrated the CFQ's predictive validity through its association with reduced employee communication and increased withdrawal behaviours. In a Nigerian organizational context, Akanni (2019) reported a Cronbach's α of .78 as evidence of the CFQ's reliability. Internal consistency reliability coefficient of the CFQ was adequate in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$).

Psychological Meaningfulness Scale (PMS)

The PMS (May et al., 2004) consists of six items designed to assess the degree of meaning that individuals perceive in their work-related activities. Items were scored on a 7-point scale format ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree), and all items were positively worded. Sample items include: *My job activities are personally meaningful to me; The work I do on this job is worthwhile; I feel that the work I do on my job is valuable.* May et al. (2004) reported a Cronbach's α of .90, confirming its strong internal consistency. Validity was supported through correlations with work engagement and job characteristics (e.g., role fit, autonomy) (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004). In Nigeria, Ugwu and Onyishi (2018) validated the PMS, reporting a Cronbach's α of .88. In this study, we obtained a Cronbach's α of .82 indicating a good internal consistency reliability.

Utrecht Work Engagement Scale

The 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-17) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) measures vigour, dedication, absorption on a 7-point scale format ranging from 0 (Never) to 6 (Always). Sample items for the scale include: *At my work, I feel bursting with energy; My job inspires me; Time flies when I am working.* The original developers reported an α of .91 for the

total scale (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Internal consistency of the UWES-17 in Nigeria was very high ($\alpha = .85$) and the test-retest reliability with an interval of three months was .77 (Ugwu, 2013). For the current study, Cronbach's α of .87 was obtained, indicating strong internal consistency.

Statistical analyses

Pearson correlation analysis was used to determine the relationships of the demographic factors, predictors and outcome variable. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses for the study. Based on expert recommendations, it is important to identify the confounding variables that are present but are beyond a given unit of analysis of interest in applied psychological research (Schjoedt & Sangboon, 2015). Hence, following best-practice guidelines (e.g., Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Memon et al., 2024), we determined that it is appropriate to include specific control variables (age and academic status) in the regression analysis to correct for their contributions, aligning with the existing theoretical framework and some of the empirical studies on work engagement we reviewed earlier. It is also critical to account for these demographic factors in our statistical analyses because of their established relationship with both psychological meaningfulness (e.g., Agha et al., 2024; Barnard, 2013) and climate of fear (e.g., Al Shayeb et al., 2024; Cañavate-Buchón & Meneghel, 2023).

RESULTS

Pearson's correlations showed that gender (coded as 1 = male; 2 = female) did not significantly correlate with any of the study's variables. Higher level of study was associated with increase in climate of fear ($r = .08, p < .05$), but level of study was not significantly associated with psychological meaningfulness and work engagement. Age was positively associated with climate of fear ($r = .11, p < .01$) but age did not significantly correlate with any other variable in the study. Climate of fear had a positive relationship with psychological meaningfulness ($r = .51, p < .001$) and work engagement ($r = .58, p < .001$). Psychological meaningfulness was positively associated with work engagement ($r = .65, p < .001$).

Table 1: Hierarchical multiple regression predicting work engagement by climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness with age and level of study as controls

Predictors	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Age	.82	.46	.10	.29	.04	.77	.38	.05	1.17
Level of study	-.89	.84	-.06	-.78	-.05	-1.14	-.34	-.02	-.57
Climate of fear				.67	.58	19.95***	.39	.33	11.42***
Psychological meaningfulness							.91	.48	16.70***
R^2		.01			.34			.51	
ΔR^2		.01			.33			.17	
<i>F</i>	1.75 (2, 795)			134.39(3, 794)***			205.74(4, 793)***		
ΔF	1.75 (2, 795)			397.90(1, 794)***			278.76(1, 793)***		

In Table 1, we included only age and level of study as control variables in the hierarchical multiple regression because gender did not significantly correlate with any of the variables in the study. Age and level of study did not significantly predict work engagement, $\beta = .10, p > .05$ and $\beta = -1.06, p > .05$, respectively. The model in step 1 was not significant, $F(2, 795) = 1.75, R = .01$. Step 2 indicated that climate of fear was a positive predictor of work engagement, $\beta = .58, p < .001$. The unstandardized regression coefficient (*B*) showed that for every one unit rise in climate of fear, work engagement increases by .67 units. The contribution of climate of fear in explaining the variance in work engagement was 33% ($\Delta R^2 = .33$), and the model was significant, $F\Delta(1, 794) = 397.90, R = .34$.

Step 3 indicated that psychological meaningfulness was a positive predictor of work engagement, $\beta = .48, p < .001$. The unstandardized regression coefficient (*B*) showed that for every one unit rise in psychological meaningfulness, work engagement increases by .91 units. The

contribution of psychological meaningfulness in explaining the variance in work engagement was 17% ($\Delta R^2 = .17$), and the model was significant, $F(1, 793) = 278.76$, $R = .51$. The covariates, climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness collectively explained 51% of the variance in work engagement.

DISCUSSION

In the current research, we sought to know whether climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness predict Nigerian police cadet's work engagement. We found that climate of fear positively predicted work engagement. The hypothesis which stated that police cadets with high climate of fear would report less work engagement was not supported. Instead, we found that high climate of fear predicted increased work engagement. This finding is contrary to previous research findings showing that fear-inducing practices hinder work engagement (Akanni, 2019; Ashkanasy & Nicholson, 2003). Our finding aligns with Bakker and Leiter's (2010) cautionary note that short-term stress may serve as a motivator, whereas long-term fear threatens psychological safety, which is essential for engagement at work. It is possible that the fear inducing situations that the cadets are exposed to in their training are transient which makes them less debilitating to well-being outcomes.

Although fear may be assumed to be negative, fear can be an effective motivator depending on what type of fear is present and in the context of fear. If a leader helps his employees face their fears to encourage action, it can be considered good leadership. However, if fear used for short-term achievement, it could have damaging long-term effects (Baring, 2019). It is possible that the police cadets in this study have adjusted well to the prevailing situation at work. They may have learnt to push back on their fears and take away its power. In such situations, they can find a reason to take a positive action in doing their job.

A climate of fear in the society may be related to an institutional climate of fear for the law enforcement agencies because the cadets may be concerned about their performance in their duty posts when they become sworn officers. To improve work engagement in the context of climate of fear, cadets and their institutional leadership should refrain from external threats like crime, violence, and public insecurity while placing more emphasis on motivators that strengthen the sense of purpose, duty, and urgency in cadets' training. The Nigerian Police Academy should also establish psychologically safe spaces where cadets feel encouraged, capable, and supported as they undergo their training. The police authorities should also emphasise mission-driven values, stress resilience training (e.g., controlled exposure to stressful scenarios) and employ other programs to foster team cohesion among the cadets in the presence of fear arousing situations and experiences. When the cadets see themselves as change agents in a society that is ravaged by insecurity and socio-economic instability, it will increase their engagement and readiness to face the demands of maintaining law and order.

We also found that psychological meaningfulness was a positive predictor of work engagement. Thus, the hypothesis which stated that police cadets who perceive their work as psychologically meaningful would report increased engagement at work was supported. This finding supports previous studies which demonstrated that having a meaningful work positively contributes to work engagement (Rosso et al., 2010; Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013; Ruslan et al., 2014; Ugwu & Onyishi, 2018). This is also consistent with the views of Schaufeli et al's integrated model of work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002) such that finding meaning in one's work functions as a powerful intrinsic motivator and personal resource. Police cadets who experience higher levels of meaningfulness at work may also engage themselves in 'extra-role' behaviour willingly (Kaur & Mittal, 2020). These cadets may be competent enough to consider their work purposeful and focused, a perception that offers them a feeling of belongingness and responsibility in whatever they work on. Psychological meaningfulness as it affects work engagement is critical to improve organizational functioning and highlight the role of work as a motivator. Work is where an

individual grows, is where they spend most of their time, and is an area that impacts the meaning and purpose of the job in one's life (Kaur & Mittal, 2020).

Psychological meaningfulness among police cadets can be enhanced by connecting their educational activities and training programs to real life goals such as ensuring a just society, protecting communities, and saving lives. Cadets can better understand the importance of their chosen profession if they are exposed to the struggles of disadvantaged communities, hear stories of heroic policing, and participate in community service programs that are not core security programmes. Cadets who have realized that their education and training will benefit a greater number of people within and outside the country beyond themselves are more likely to believe that their work has meaning. This will increase their vigour, dedication and absorption in their training and future responsibilities.

Limitations of the study and directions for future research

A key strength of this study is that it fills an important gap in knowledge by examining the contributions of climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness in work engagement among Nigerian police cadets. However, there are some notable limitations of the study. First, our study's cross-sectional design limits making causal explanations. While we have found serves as foundations for future research efforts or programs, they are at best, associations between the predictors and work engagement. Second, we used self-report measures for the data collection, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias, recall errors, and subjective interpretation of items. Third, the findings may not be generalizable to police training institutions in other countries or to workers in other organizations in Nigeria.

Further research is needed on motivational processes and personal resource development interventions and programs to improve work engagement. One avenue for such future research is longitudinal studies, ecological momentary assessments, and testing curvilinear models on the associations we have observed in the present study. Future research should also consider mediator and moderator variables (e.g., career exploration activities) to enhance the relationship model and enrich the literature on work engagement in law enforcement settings. An important direction in this regard is the possibility of an interaction between climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness in relation to work engagement. It is plausible that the negative impact of a fear-based climate may be buffered if cadets have a strong sense of psychological meaningfulness. Thus, meaningful work and other positive psychological variables may function as moderator(s) - a motivational counterbalance to a stressful environment, preserving engagement despite adverse conditions. This possibility needs to be explored.

Conclusion

Climate of fear and psychological meaningfulness were found to be critical factors in work engagement in police training. The findings have important implications for theory and practice, particularly for educators, police administrators and psychologists. Efforts are needed at the police academy as well as at other levels of training to facilitate the development of a sense of meaning and growth of police cadets. Human resource management initiatives (including recruitment, selection, induction, training and development, and performance management) should be implemented to promote psychological resources which will result in engagement at work. Being engaged in one's career development process is essential for cadets to be satisfied with their career progress and to self-determinedly prepare for their career life beyond the context of the institution. Psychological resources, particularly meaningfulness of work, is necessary for police cadets to prepare themselves for the arduous task of policing in Nigeria. Addressing both climate of fear and sense of meaning at work can enhance cadets' performance, improve institutional outcomes and potentially elevate career success for police cadets.

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