A Matter of Give and Take? Perceived Organisational Politics and Organisational Support as Predictors of Counterproductive Work Behaviours

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Abstract

Politics has become an unfortunate fact of organisational life and this has resulted in employees exhibiting negative organisational behaviours such as counterproductive work behaviours. The current study investigated the predictive value of perceived organisational politics and perceived organisational support on counterproductive work behaviours among employees in selected local governments in the North central, Nigeria. A total of two hundred (200) volunteer local government employees participated in the study. Consistent with our hypothesised predictive relationship, the results of the hierarchical regression analysis showed that perceived organisational politics positively predicted counterproductive work behaviours among these employees. The result also indicated that high perceived organizational support negatively predicted counterproductive work behaviours. It is recommended that organisations should be wary of its employees that perpetrate dysfunctional politics considering the consequences to both individuals and the organisation. Implications of findings were discussed and suggestions for further studies were highlighted.

Keywords: counterproductive work behaviours, local government, perceived organisational politics, perceived organisational support

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Introduction

Previous studies have identified perceptions of organisational politics (POP) as the main cause of undesirable work outcomes (e.g., Cohen & Diamant, 2019; Meisler et al., 2020). This is primarily because POP in work environment is considered an organisational stressor that threatens positive job outcomes (Ryan, 2020; Meisler et al., 2020; Meisler et al., 2017). Organisational politics refer to people's intentional and subversive behaviours exhibited in organisations primarily to get hold of power and resources of the organisation for self-serving purposes (Ferris et al., 2019; Goo et al., 2019) at the expense of others and the organisation.

POP appears to be widespread in many organisations without commensurate research efforts to address the challenge especially in Nigerian local environment. To give credence to the above assertion, Kadiri and Umemezia (2019) reported the damaging consequences and negative impacts on organisational wellbeing, engendered by POP in local governments but such activities usually go unnoticed or unreported perhaps due to its criminal nature. Despite that, CWBs are becoming a prevalent challenge in local governments in Nigeria; to date relatively little empirical study has directly addressed this generally misunderstood and neglected employee behaviour (Akinbode, 2009). Most of the studies on the relationship between POP and CWBs were carried out in Western-European countries (e.g., Cohen & Diamant, 2019; Meisler et al., 2020) with less study in other contexts such as Nigeria. More so, despite the evidence linking POP to increased CWBs, inconsistency of studies on POP has been reported (Miller et al., 2008). This therefore necessitates further investigation to further deepen our understanding of the impact POP has on job outcomes including CWBs. As far as we know, studies that investigated the impact of POP and perceived organizational support (POS) on CWBs among local government employee are scarce. Therefore, carrying out similar studies in the Nigerian context focusing on POP and POS as antecedents of CWBs is a step in the right direction. This is because it will help in extending our knowledge of the impact of POP and POS on CWBs beyond what we already know.

Recent evidence indicates that CWBs, which implies the destructive attempts of employees to intentionally harm the organisation and/or its other members (Meisler et al., 2018), has increased. CWB is formerly defined as "voluntary behaviour that violates significant organisational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organisation, its members, or both" (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556). It refers to behaviour by employees that harms an organisation or its members (Meisler et al., 2020; Wiltshire et al., 2014) and includes acts such as theft, sabotage, verbal abuse, withholding of effort, lying, refusing to cooperate, and physical assault. Over the years, various researchers have studied a similar set of behaviours, though they have used different terminology depending on their theoretical focus, including unethical behaviour (Valle et al., 2019), organisational detrimental behaviours (Götz et al., 2020), workplace deviance (Khattak et al., 2021), revenge (Ugwu & Anhange, 2015), and antisocial behaviour in organisations (Akinbode, 2009).

The reason for the growing interest in CWBs is obvious in that CWBs have become a constant and unfortunate phenomenon in organisations and have tremendous negative impacts on both organisations in terms of lost productivity, increased insurance costs, lost or damaged property, and low turnover (Haider et al., 2020), as well as the employees in terms of increased dissatisfaction (Park & Lee, 2020). It is estimated that significant number of employees at one time or the other have engaged in aggressive behaviours such as theft, fraud, vandalism, withholding efforts, absenteeism, and sabotage (Griffin & Lopez, 2005). These attitudes violate workplace norms and therefore are considered antisocial type of behaviours (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). It is therefore not surprising that organisational

scholars have focused on various forms of negative behaviours in the workplace (De Clercq et al., 2021; Haider et al., 2020; Hochwarter et al., 2020); typical of these behaviours is CWBs. The present study focuses on individuals' perceptions of organisational politics, which represent subjective appraisals of the incidence of self-serving behavior in taking decision at and resource allocation processes (Rosen et al., 2009). Such dysfunctional political behavior is considered an extra source of organisational stressor and frustration (De Clercq et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2017) that leads organisational members to engage in destructive behaviours to reinstate their sense of equity and justice (Penney & Spector, 2008; Pindek & Spector, 2016).

Theoretical background and development of hypotheses

We intend to add to the literature by drawing on the Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964) to explain and possibly understand the organisational activities that may lead employees to engage in CWBs. SET has been identified as an essential theory in any exchange relationship. It postulates that human relationships are formed using a subjective cost-benefit analysis. Its main thrust is that individuals appear to reciprocate actions that were either punished or rewarded in the past. Importantly, SET claims that social relationships are based on mutual trust that gestures of goodwill will be given in return (Blau, 1964). In a meta-analysis, Colquitt et al. (2013) indicated that in the past decade many organisational researchers have focused on social exchange as a type of interpersonal relationship, drawing mainly on Blau's (1964) theorising, and that SET was the dominant approach for examining reactions to justice perceptions. In the current study, POP and organisational support could be offered to employees by the organisation, but employees' response toward this behaviour is reflected on how they perceive them. For example, if the employees perceive high sense of dysfunctional politics where they are manipulated to others' advantage, they may respond accordingly by engaging in CWBs. On the other hand, those employees that may perceive the organization as being supportive will more likely reciprocate by not engaging in any form of retaliatory either directed to the organization or to specific individuals.

POP and CWBs

Employee theft, fraud, and sabotage, as well as playing mean pranks, acting rudely, are some of the suspected and fastest growing deviance workplace behaviours among Nigerian workgroups in recent times. Indeed, the impetus for the growing interest in workplace deviance behaviours is obvious considering the increasing prevalence of this type of behaviour in the workplace and the enormous economic and social costs associated with such behaviours (Akinbode, 2009; Galperin & Burke, 2006). Today, CWBs has become an important concern for local governments in Nigeria and a topic of increasing research attention (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). Several studies in have documented not only the financial impact of it, but also the social and psychological effects of negative workplace behaviour and organisational politics on the organisation (e.g., Peterson, 2002). Landells and Albrecht (2019) reported that POP is significantly and indirectly related to work engagement and stress through meaningful work. POP was equally found to be positively related to stress, burnout, turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Allen et al., 2003; Eisenberger et al., 2002; Khan et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2008; Chang et al., 2009; Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). It was also found that POP has negative relationship with other numerous work-related outcomes such as depressed moods (Cho & Yang, 2018; De Clercq & Belauste-guigoitia, 2017; Kane-Frieder et al., 2014) and inattentive behaviors (Meisler & Vigoda-Gadot, 2014). Based on the above evidence, we state that:

Hypothesis 1: POP will positively predict CWBs among local government employees.

Perceived organisational support (POS) and CWBs

POS is defined "as employees' beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Eisenberger et al., 1986, p. 501), Employees have been found to develop general beliefs concerning the degree to which the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). It therefore follows that when employees believe that the organizations for which they work are supportive, positive energy is mobilised and the employees are obliged to reciprocate by engaging in desirable organisational behaviours; reverse appears to be the case when employees have low perception of support.

Perceived organisational support has been demonstated to be linked to Enhanced work engagement levels, job satisfaction and low employee stress (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Kurtessis et al., 2015; Karatepe & Mehmet, 2016; Musenze et al., 2020). Organisational support considers the development, nature, and outcomes of POS as influencing CWBs (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). According to Eisenberger et al. (2001), employees develop POS to meet socio emotional needs and to determine the organisation's readiness to reward increased efforts made on its behalf. Blau (1964) stated in his findings that the employee–organisation relationship is strengthened through the trade of positive outcomes between employees and their organisation. Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), POS would obligate employees to increase their positive outputs, attendance, and punctuality thus reducing counterproductive work behaviours among workers.

Eisenberger et al. (2001) found POS to be related to employees' felt obligation to help the organisation, and this relationship was greater among employees who strongly endorsed the norm of reciprocity as applied to the employee–employer relationship. Eisenberger et al. (2001) also found a relationship between employees with high POS and avoidance of high levels of CWBs such as unnecessary absenteeism, tardiness, and engaging in non-work-related conversations, which meet a variety of personal needs while being harmful to the organisation. POS is found to be negatively related to absenteeism and supervisor-rated withdrawal behaviours (Eisenberger et al., 1986), deviant behaviour (Chen et al., 2016), turnover intention and actual turnover (Allen et al., 2003; Eisenberger et al., 2002). The general negative relationship between POS and CWBs such as withdrawal behaviour has also been established (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In response to high perception of support from the organisation, employees tend to reciprocate positively by less turnover intentions and higher organisational involvement (Edwards & Peccei, 2015), enhanced organisational citizenship behaviour (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012), improved organizational commitment and lower voluntary turnover (Allen & Shanock, 2013), and affective commitment (Caesens et al., 2015). However, employees with the low perception of support from the organization tend to be more engaged in destructive behavior (Alias et al., 2013). Under such circumstances, employees' reciprocation of high POS might have a strong preventive effect on CWBs. We therefore state that:

Hypothesis 2: POS will be negatively predict CWBs among local government employees.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total number of 200 participants drawn from four local governments in Benue State North central, Nigeria participated in the study. The four local governments were selected out of the eight local government council of the State through the simple random sampling technique. The participants that were randomly selected for the study consisted of 109 (49.1%) males and 91 (41.0%) females. Marital status of sampled participants indicates that 84(37.8%) were single, 106(47.7%) were married, divorce participants were 9 (4.5%) and 1(0.5%) widow. Their ages ranged from 30 to 53 with a mean age ($M = 38.37$, $SD = 8.84$).

To collect data for the study, permission to administer the questionnaire copies was obtained from the head of personnel management (HPM) in each of the local government sampled for the study. Subsequently, a total number of the 217 questionnaire copies were distributed to the employees at their workplaces. Of this number, 209 were returned representing response rate of 96%. Nine copies were discarded due to improper completion and 200 copies only were used for data analysis. The researchers distributed the questionnaire copies at four randomly selected local government secretariats in Benue State, North central, Nigeria. No incentive was given to encourage participation and no reward was after participation. The administration and collection of the completed questionnaires were done within 2 working weeks.

Instruments

Perceived organisational politics scale developed by Kacmar and Carlson (1997) was used to measure the extent to which employees are aware of the politics played in their organisation. This scale identifies three dimensions that include: *General Political Behaviour* (2 items), *Go Along To Get Ahead* (7 items), *Pay and Promotion Policies* (6 items). Representative items for the three factors include: "People in this organisation attempt to build themselves up by tearing others down" (General Political Behaviour), "Agreeing with powerful others is the best alternative in this organisation" (Go Along to Get Ahead), and "When it comes to pay raise and promotion decisions, policies are irrelevant" (Pay and Promotion Policies). The scale was designed with a 5-point Likert-type response format that ranges from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. We used the total score of the subscales as a measure of employees' overall perception of organizational politics. The reliability coefficient index of the original scale is .90. This coefficient is comparable to the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .91 that was obtained for this scale in the current study that was obtained through the item analysis.

We used the Perceived Organisational Support (POS; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). It is a 36-item scale that represents possible opinions that an individual may have about working at a particular organisation. The scale is measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Sample items include: "The organisation values my contribution to its wellbeing", "The organisation fails to appreciate any extra effort from me" (reversed), and "Help is available from the organisation when I have a problem". The original Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is .93 whereas the present study established a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .84 with the use of item analysis performed. Higher scores in the instrument indicate high perceived support from the organisation.

Counterproductive Work Behaviours Checklist (CWBs-C; Spector et al., 2006) was used to assess employees' involvement in CWBs. It is a multi-dimensional scale made up of 45items developed in Likert-type scale measuring a wide range of CWBs (abuse, production

of deviance, sabotage, withdrawal, and theft). Participants were asked to indicate how often they had exhibited each of the behaviours in their present job. Response choices were presented in a 5-point format ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (every day). Sample items includes: "Told people outside the job what a lousy place you work for" (Abuse), "Purposely worked slowly when things needed to get done" (production of deviance), "Purposely wasted your employer's materials/supplies" (sabotage), "Came to work late without permission" (withdrawal), "Took supplies or tools home without permission" (theft). Spector et al. (2006) found a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .90. We performed item analysis on the scale and observed a Cronbach's alpha of .92 for the present study.

Control variables

We controlled for age, gender, marital status, religion, education, and job position because previous studies (e.g., Berry et al., 2007; Ng & Feldman, 2008; Pletzer, 2021; Ugwu & Asogwa, 2018) reported that these variables are related to CWBs. However, age was measured as continuous variable, whereas other variables were measured as categorical variables.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among study variables

	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Age	38.37	8.84	1.00								
2	Gender	1.55	.50	-.44***	1.00							
3	MS	1.60	.49	.65***	-.18**	1.00						
4	Religion	1.82	.38	-.70***	.08	-.05	1.00					
5	Education	1.42	.50	-.47***	.26***	-.27***	-.06	1.00				
6	JP	1.42	.49	-.46***	.27***	-.26***	-.06	.09	1.00			
7	POP	111.59	6.81	-.08	.06	-.04	-.04	.09	.09	1.00		
8	POS	42.47	6.12	.03	.07	.03	-.07	.14*	.15*	.34***	1.00	
9	CWBs	78.19	21.88	.09	.04	.14	-15	.12*	.13*	.12*	.44***	1.00

Key: MS – marital status, JP – job position, POP – perceived organisational politics, POS = perceived organisational support, CWBs = counterproductive work behaviours; * = P<.05; ** = p<.01; *** = P<.001. Note: A total of 200 employees participated in the study. Gender (1= male, 2 = female); marital status (1single, 2 = married); religion (1= Islam, 2 = Christianity, 3= others); Education (1= high, 2= low); Rank (1= Senior, 2 = Junior). Politics and perceived support were coded so that higher scores on them indicated higher perceptions of politics and support.

Table 2: Hierarchical regression results

Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	.13*	.13*	.07
Gender	.08	.07	.04
Marital status	.12*	.12*	.12*
Religion	-.13*	-.12*	-.11*
Education	-.07	-.04	.16
Rank	.26***	.22***	-.04
POP		.11*	.13*
POS			-.42***
R^2	.05	.06	.21
ΔR^2	.08	.01	.15
ΔF	2.83	2.82	7.84

Key: * = p < .05; *** = p < .001. *Note:* POP = Perceived organisational politics; POS = Perceived organisational support

The results of the descriptive statistics in Table 1 above indicated that among all the control variables only religion was negatively and significantly related to CWBs (β = -.13, *p*< .05). Age and marital status were positively related to CWBs (β = .13, *p*< .05) and (β = .12, *p*< .05) respectively. However, the results of the regression analyses presented in Table 2 above showed that the control variables accounted for 5% of the variance in CWBs. The results further showed that POP accounted for 5.8% of the variance in CWBs far and above the control variables. When we checked the regression equation model, organisational politics was positively related to CWBs (β = .11, *p*< .05). The results of the regression analysis also showed that POS accounted for 20.8% of the variance in CWBs far and above the control variables and POP. The regression equation model reveals that POS was negatively related to CWBs (β = -.42, *p*< .001).

Discussion

In the present study, we examined whether POP and POS will predict CWBs among local government workers in selected local government in Benue state, North central, Nigeria. The results of the study indicated that POP negatively related to CWBs. Specifically, high perception of politics in the local governments led to increased CWBs from the workers. Based on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), employees give something in exchange of any treatment they receive from the organisation. In this context, when they perceive high organisational politics which is often inimical to their progress and wellbeing, they pay the organisations back with engaging in CWBs. Our finding tends to agree with Meisler et al., 2020 and Wiltshere et al., 2014) who found a statistical insignificant result between POP and CWBs. However, there are other studies that contradict our findings (e.g., Chang et al., 2009) who observed that POP did not have a negative relationship with CWBs.

Another finding of the present study was that POS significantly predicted CWBs. This result implies that when employees are convinced that the organisation supports them, they will become open to reciprocating the good behaviours and intentions of the management by not engaging in CWBs. This is in line with the SET (Blau, 1964). This result is in agreement with the work of Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011), which found that when employees

perceive high organisational support, they are report less involvement in CWBs. More so, our finding agrees with earlier studies (e.g., Maan et al., 2020; Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Vardi & Weitz, 2004). The current findings also tend to agree with the study of Allen et al. (2003) which found POS to be negatively associated with turnover intention.

These results could further be discussed around the threats of allowing POP to become a culture at the local government councils. The insights on the danger of allowing organisatioanl politics to flourish at different local government councils would undermine the overall efforts being made by the management of these local governments. POP tends to create tension that often degenerate to employees taking to CWBs as a way to repay the organisation as well as the individuals working in the same organisation, especially those the employees may perceive as the architects of organisational politics. When these victims of organisational politics take to CWBs, it becomes extremely difficult for the organisation to realise its set goals. Second, the good news is that when the organisation is perceived to provide support to local government employees, these employees tend to desist from taking to CWBs. This therefore implies that as some senior employees may take to politics in the administration of their various duties, the management should endeavour to provide support to the junior employees to cushion any impact that organisational politics may exert on the employees who are the victims of practice.

Implications of the study

The present findings have some implications for the management as well as the employees. It was observed that POP positively predicted CWB whereas POS negatively predicted CWB. The counselor will be able to deploy skills in this instance to help both the organisations as well as the employees. POP may be subservient and often difficult to observe by the third party (top management) represented by supervisors that perpetrate politics. That means that the organisation may be feeling the heat being generated via employees' engagement in CWB but may not be knowledgeable enough to identify why employees take to such behaviour. In such circumstances, only a skilled counselor will be able to identify, advice, and guide the management to overcome this challenge. The counselor would also be able to work on the psyche of the employees in the effort to change the way they evaluate some actions of the supervisors that represent the management. A skilled counselor when given this task may be able to convince the employees to view those dysfunctional behaviours as challenges instead of hindrances to their personal goals. Thus, the counselor can also design intervention programme that would increase employees' perception of support in the organisation as they are likely to reduce the frequency of CWBs. Another implication might be to create a peer rating system whereby team members rate each other (anonymously) on the CWBs items and receive averaged feedback about their performance on these CWBs. This is based on the idea that peers may be in the best position to observe deviant behaviour, especially in team environments. As widely documented in the literature, CWBs causes substantial financial, physical, and psychological consequences toward organisations and their employees. Therefore, understanding workplace deviance is essential for organisations and their leaders. Organisations that want to minimize the occurrence of workplace deviance could make informed changes by a counselor.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

As always, the findings of this study should be considered in light its limitations. First, this study adopts a cross-sectional design that denies it the opportunity to establish cause-effect relationship. Second, the sample for the study is homogenous, that is drawn from similar organisations. This also poses threat for the findings of the study to be inferred to

larger and/or diverse workforce. Furthermore, data for the study were self-report and as a result of this, the observed relationships among the study variables might be inflated by common method variance. Even though anonymity of responses were promised and adhered to which might have reduced the common method variance, it may not have eliminated this shortcoming. More importantly single source of data makes it difficult to identify whether the variables studied are bidirectional.

Keeping in mind the limitations of the study and the deficiencies often associated with single source of data, it is recommended that future studies should consider obtaining data from other sources such as from co-workers, immediate supervisor. This will more likely mitigate any spurious data that may be generated from self-report. To be able to establish causation, it is recommended that future studies should adopt the longitudinal design. Longitudinal data will likely minimize the problem of common method variance (Podasakoff et al., 2003) which increases the internal validity of the study. Future studies in this area should consider more diverse sample to be able to enhance the possibility to generalize the findings of the study.

Conclusion

The study investigated the relationship between POP, POS and CWBs among staff in selected local government areas in the North central Nigeria. The findings showed that POP predicted CWBs while POS negatively predicted CWBs. These results suggest that whereas POP increases the workers' chances of engaging in CWBs, reverse is the case when they perceive high organisational support. Particularly, when employees are supported by the organisation the workers do not engage in such destructive behaviour. This information will be helpful to employers, supervisors, and the organisation as whole to be able to design intervention programs that will save the organisation from incurring avoidable cost that may result from workers that engage in CWBs.

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