



Perceived Toxic Leadership and Institutional Conspiracy as Predictors of Psychological Distress among University Employees in Akwa Ibom State

by

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Abstract

Toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy are areas of growing interest in organizational research. This study explored perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy as predictors of psychological distress among employees in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. The participants in the study comprised two hundred employees drawn from University of Uyo, Uyo and Akwa Ibom State University Ikot Akpaden, Mkpato Enin Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. They included 105 (52.5%) males and 95 (47.5%) females. Their ages ranged between 18-68 years, with mean age of 41.3 years. The study utilized random sampling and purposive sampling techniques to select the organizations and the participants respectively. Three instruments were used: Shortened Version of Perceived Toxic Leadership, Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire and Kessler psychological distress scale. The study adopted ex-post facto design and multiple regression served as appropriate statistics for analyses of the data. The Study results showed that perceived toxic leadership significantly predicted psychological distress among University employees. However institutional conspiracy did not significantly predict psychological distress among the studied population. Based on the findings, the study recommends that appropriate mechanisms should be created to promote self-management and resilience of the employees.

Key words: Toxic leadership, institutional conspiracy, psychological distress, university employees.

1. Introduction

The mental health of workers as it affects human life has been a growing concern for organizational researchers in recent time. This is more pertinent now when workplace has become a bedrock where individuals spend most of their daily lives, establish friendship and contributes significantly to the society. Moreover, Fairholm (1996) maintained that workplace has become the fountain of community for many people.

The researchers in industrial setting are of the view that certain intervening variables in workplaces including work characteristics or conditions, employees' personal idiosyncrasies, situational and other environmental factors, unpredictable and authoritarian tendency of leaders in their organization may be associated with psychological distress. Doherty, Moran and Kartalova – O'Doherty (2018) classified psychological distress as a common mental health problem in the community.

Mirowsky and Ross (2002) defined psychological distress as a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression (sadness, hopelessness and loss of interest in things individual used to enjoy) and anxiety (which include feeling tensed and restlessness). Psychological distress can also be measured by certain indicators such as negative affect and suicidal Ideation (Travis *et al.*, 2021).

In organizational setting, Ridner (2014) espoused psychological distress as a distinct uneasy emotional state that employees experience at work in reaction to stressors from their job that cause either temporary or lasting terms to the individual.

The psychological distress, specifically, work-related type has been used to described the mental and physical well-being of workers who have been affected by a stressful work environment which is characterized by increased levels of non-specific negative emotional state (Viertio *et al.*, 2021). The basic symptoms of psychological distress manifest themselves differently and these include insomnia, fatigue, irritability, forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating. These symptoms however tend to manifest themselves in workplace than at home. Psychological work-related distress could affect employee's quality life, it could lead to poor job performance, general deterioration in employee's level of productivity, decrease in job involvement and increase in turnover rate (Studies by Dunleavy *et al.*, (2020) revealed that psychological distress of work might cause severe types of mental disorder in employees.). However, worker's experience of stress is highly individualistic and varies in terms of duration and intensity (Moksnes, Byrne Mazanov & Espines, 2010). Also, if people lack resources to cope with various pressures and demands, if people lack goal relevance and distress manageability result in positive stress (Travis *et al.*, 2020), stressors are perceived as threatening and can be detrimental to psychological health and well-being (Murberg & Bru, 2005).

One significant variable implicated as a potential threat to employee's psychological well-being is perceived toxic leadership (Asha & Snigdha, 2019). Frater (2014) refers to the word "toxin" to mean both a bow and an arrow fired from a bow when discussing the origin of the term "toxic" from ancient Greek. Nevertheless, the idea was eventually altered and from toxin arose the toxic which implies poison for use on arrows. From this, there seems to be common features between "toxicus" (poisonous) on the arrows of the bow and leaders who inflict physical and psychological harm on the people/subordinate they lead.

Leaders function to improve human potential and create conducive environment for goals attainment. But, toxic leadership produces multi-dimensional constructs that are just as harmful to the human health as a dose of poison (Reed, 2010). These constructs include authoritarianism, narcissism, self-promotion at the detriment of the subordinate etc. Furthermore, Lipman-Blumen (2015) posited that toxic leadership's activities and process cause long lasting harm to both their employees and organizations through their destructive behaviour and dysfunctional personality traits. This, Saleh *et al.*, (2018) opined that toxic leadership is associated with decreased employee performance, increased level of psychological distress and low level of commitment.

Mehta and Maheshalari (2014) described toxic leadership as an approach where employees are rewarded for conforming to the leader and punished for challenging the leader's authority. Furthermore, toxic leader restrains enthusiasm, creativity and autonomy. In this situation, only the opinion and interest of the leader rules supreme. Bullis and Peed (2016) believed toxic leaders are arrogant, self-serving, inflexible and petty. Lipman-Blumen (2005) acknowledge that perceived toxic leadership that goes with destructive behaviour and dysfunctional personal characteristics, inflict severe and enduring harm on the employees and organizations.

Another variable of importance in psychological distress is institutional conspiracy. It is defined as a secret arrangement between two or more powerful groups' member. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) explained institutional conspiracy as the outcome of secret, deliberate actions and cover ups at the hand of malicious and powerful groups. These powerful groups are within the workplace and they operate secretly to achieve a malevolent goal. For instance, some managers may intentionally conspire to hire a preferred candidate for a job, or work harmoniously to have an employee fired.

Many scholars, Douglas (2017), Jolly *et al.*, (2020) acknowledged that exposure to conspiracy in workplace has been linked with increased feelings of powerlessness, disillusionment, uncertainty, mistrust and anomie, which are indicators of distress. Similarly, Lantian and Colleagues (2018) stressed that institutional conspiracy creates social stigma, does not help people meet important psychological needs (social affiliation need) and may make people feel as though outsiders in an in group setting.

Conversely, Levinsson *et al.*, (2021) argued that institutional conspiracy may provide a mechanism to empower (distressed individuals by allowing them to adopt narratives that explain and reduce the current uncertainties and distress (providing) individuals with on opportunity to feel in control.

In particular, an increase in work related psychological distress is common among university employees due to the complex nature of job functions, tight work schedules, changing technologies, frequent work disruptions, cyclical competition for funding, and tension from unruly behaviour of some students and struggle to balance multiple roles. The current study being exploratory seeks to expand the existing evidence-base in order to offer a better insight to psychological stressors among this significant work group and identify possible avenues for interventions.

Thus, it is hypothesized that: (1) perceived toxic leadership will significantly predict psychological distress of university employees. (2) Institutional conspiracy will significantly predict psychological distress of employees.

2. Materials and Methods

This study utilized an *expost facto* design, which focuses on how actions that have already occurred can predict certain causes. Therefore, a researcher cannot manipulate or modify variables, actions or behaviours that have already occurred (Clarence & George, 2018). For this study, perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy are predictor variables, while psychological distress is criterion variable.

200 participants selected from both teaching and non-teaching staff of the University of Uyo and Akwa Ibom State University, Ikot Akpaden, all in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, participated in the study. Employees from the University were deemed fit for the study considering the apparent cyclical competition for relevance among university based unions, struggle to balance multiple roles, etc. Using purposive sampling technique, the male employees were 105 (52.5%) while their female

counterparts were 95 (47.5%). Their ages ranged from 18-68 with a mean (X) age of 41.3 years. Teaching staff were 76 (38.0%), those of non-teaching staff were 60(30%) and technologists were 64 (32%). Majority of the participants were married 153 (76.5%), while 47 (23.5% were single). The respondents represented a range of educational attainment statuses that were collapsed into high (n=139, 69.5%) and low (n=61, 30.5%). The participants were approached in the different work places and their consent were sought to participate in the study.

Measures

Demographic information of the participants including age, gender, ethnicity, marital status was collected. Shortened version of Perceived Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008) was used to measure perceived toxic leadership. It is a 15-item scale with a 5-point Likert scaling format measuring five dimensions of perceived toxic leadership which are self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism and authoritarianism. The scale was found to be reliable with each of the five dimensions of the scale had high reliability (Abusiv supervision: $\alpha = 0.93$, Authoritarian leadership: $\alpha = 0.89$; Narcissism $\alpha = 0.88$; self-promotion $\alpha = 0.91$, unpredictable leadership: $\alpha = 0.92$).

Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder *et al.*, (2013) was used to measure institutional conspiracy. It is a 5-item scale scored on a 10-point response format. To assess test-retest reliability (only), the single – item conspiracy belief scale was assessed at both time “1” and Time “2”, it was said to have a reliable element of comparison. The internal consistency of this scale was high ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (k6, Kessler *et al.*, 2003). It consists of 6 items that assess psychological distress based on two factors, depression and anxiety and based on duration and frequency. The items are scaled in a Likert-type five point scaling format. The values go from 0 (never) to 4 (All the time). The version applied was that used in Nigeria sample. In the study, the Psychological Distress Scale k6 showed adequate internal consistency ($\alpha=0.86$).

Statistical Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using mainly multiple regression analysis given that the study intended to determine how psychological distress can be predicted through measures of perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy. In addition, a descriptive statistics showing the demographics of the study population was done and a zero-order correlation of the variables.

3. Results and Discussion

The correlation coefficient matrix results in Table I shows the extent to which the main variables of study and demographic variables was related to each other. This results indicated that marital status was positively and highly linked to age ($r=0.70$; $p<0.01$) and at the same time inversely connected to religion ($r = -0.18$; $p < 0.01$). Educational qualification was directly related to age and marital status ($r=0.43$; $p<0.01$; $r=0.53$; $p<0.05$) respectively. Whereas staff status had the highest number of single correlations with other variables: genders, age, marital status and qualification ($r=-0.17$; $p<0.05$; $r = 0.61$; $p<0.01$; $r = 0.62$; $p<0.01$; $r = 0.66$; $p<0.01$) accordingly.

Table I: Summary of Correlation Matrix of Study variables in exploring the predictive influence of perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy on psychological distress among workers.

VARIABLES	GE	AGE	RE	MS	EQ	SS	TL	IC	P D	MEAN	SD
GE	1									1.48	0.51
Age	.02	1								3.09	1.18
RE	.01	-.14	1							1.06	0.34
MS	-.00	.70**	.18**	1						2.30	0.93
EQ	.10	.43**	-.04	.53**	1					1.88	0.95
SS	+.7*	.06	.62**	.62**	.66**	1	1			2.72	1.28
TL	-.08	-.11	-.02	-.08	.01	.01	1			44.14	5.62
IC	-.05	.11	-.13	.07	.05	.13	.21**	1		38.77	7.00
PD	-.00	.07	-.14	.09	.03	.02	.22**	.12	1	1.02	3.89

NB: GE: Gender, RE: Religion; MS = Marital status; EQ = Educational Qualification; SS = Staff Status = Job Type; TL = Toxic Leadership, IC = Institutional Conspiracy; PO = Psychological Distress. PD

* Correlation significant at the 0.05 level

** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level.

Then, institutional conspiracy was directly related to perceived toxic leaderships. ($r=0.21$; $p<0.01$); as well as psychological distress also being linked positively to institutional conspiracy ($r=0.22$; $p<0.01$).

Table 2: Summary of multiple regressions based on the predictive outcomes of perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy on psychological distress among workers.

Psychological Distress

Variables	Model β	E	Beta	t-value	P	95%CI
Constant	3.03	1.28			0.00	(-1.66,770)
Perceived toxic leadership	0.14	0.95	0.21	2.73	0.00	(0.05,0.24)
Institutional Conspiracy	0.04	1.11	0.00	2.93	0.27	(-0.03, 0.12)
R ²	0.56					
F	5.83					
ΔR^2	046					
Stg	003					

Note: N = 200, CI = Confidence interval; * significant at the 0.05 level; R = 236.

Perceived toxic leadership will significantly predict psychological stress among workers.

In order to test the first study hypothesis, multiple linear regression was utilized so as to ascertain the predictive role of perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy on psychological distress among workers. The quantitative results (perceived in table 2) indicate that perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy yield a coefficient of multiple correlation (R) of 0.036 and multiple correlation square (R²) of 0.56; meaning that about 5.6% of the variance in psychological distress was explained by the effects of perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy among workers.

Furthermore, perceived toxic leadership independently predicted psychological distress among workers ($\beta = 0.14$ $t = 2.73$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the first hypotheses which stated that perceived toxic leadership will significantly predict psychological distress among employees was accepted.

Secondly, results revealed that institutional conspiracy did not predict psychological distress among workers ($\beta = 0.04$; $t = 2.93$; $p > 0.05$). However, when institutional conspiracy was merged with toxic leadership, there was a significant interplay on psychological distress, $F(2, 199) = 5.83$, $P < 0.05$. Based on this, although institutional conspiracy merged with toxic leadership to predict psychological distress, it did not predict psychological distress independently. Therefore, the second hypothesis was rejected.

This study examined perceived toxic leadership and institutional conspiracy as predictors of psychological distress among workers in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. The result showed that perceived toxic leadership significantly predict psychological distress. This finding agrees with Asha and Snigdha (2019), who revealed that employees who undergo behaviour patterns of toxic leaders suffer detrimental outcomes, such as psychological distress over extended period of time. These results provide further support for the hypothesis that toxic leadership has an adverse effect on employees' psychological well-being and mental health problems which has grown globally (Nada & Ruth, 2020). This is indicative of the fact that toxic leadership that goes with destructive behaviour and dysfunction personality characteristics, inflicts severe and enduring harm on the employees (Lipman-Blumen, 2015), and the resulting psychological distress might cause severe types of mental disorder in employees (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2020). The possible explanation for the result could be that leadership among the study population is seen as status symbol, mainly powerful and dominant status that confers the holder special privileges and sublime superiority over subordinates.

Unlike the results obtained for perceived toxic leadership, institutional conspiracy did not predict psychological distress among tertiary workers. This finding agrees with Levinsson *et al.*, (2021) who showed that institutional conspiracy may provide a mechanism to empower individuals enabling them adopt narratives that explain and reduce the current uncertainties and distress which provides individuals avenue to feel in control. Furthermore, the result is in consonant with Prooijen (2022) who revealed that conspiracy have psychological benefits by imbuing perceiver's worldview with meaning and purpose in a rewarding manner. Conversely, the result does not agree with Douglass (2014), who revealed that exposure to conspiracy in workplace is linked with increased feelings of powerlessness, disillusionment, uncertainty, mistrust and anomie which are indicators of distress.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study has practical implications for management, as captain of industries who have been assigned the responsibility of controlling and harmonizing both human and physical factors of production for effective service delivery. It will assist leaders in developing better approaches and mechanisms aimed at promoting psychological well-being in workplaces. The study results have demonstrated the significant impact of toxicity and conspiracy on promoting or inhibiting psychological distress. Hence, there is need for managers, supervisors, policy makers, co-workers, etc.,

as partners and drivers in this organizations relational-based setting to foster a healthy working environment to facilitate and enhanced optimal production and mitigate psychological distress in organization.

Furthermore, the organizations need to ensure that work environment is not saturated with toxicity by promoting positive leadership style that enhance psychological well-being. It is instructive to educate leaders adequately, and proper psychological testing should proceed recruitment and promotion of personnel into leadership positions. The organization should encourage the creation of active social support groups to mitigate toxicity.

Organizations should adopt counter-sensitization against any perceived or real conspiracy. The interaction with psychological distress is a pointer to the fact that policy efforts should combine communication and psychological strategies to mitigate the conspiracy.

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