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Original Article

Do Personality and Organizational Politics Predict Workplace Victimization? A Study among Ghanaian Employees

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ABSTRACT

Background: Workplace victimization is considered a major social stressor with significant implications for the wellbeing of employees and organizations. The aim of this study was to examine the influences of employees' personality traits and organizational politics on workplace victimization among Ghanaian employees.

Methods: Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 631 employees selected from diverse occupations through convenience sampling. Data collection tools were standardized questionnaires that measured experiences of negative acts at work (victimization), the Big Five personality traits, and organizational politics.

Results: The results from hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that among the personality traits neuroticism and conscientiousness had significant, albeit weak relationships with victimization. Organizational politics had a significant positive relationship with workplace victimization beyond employees' personality.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that compared with personal characteristics such as personality traits, work environment factors such as organizational politics have a stronger influence on the occurrence of workplace victimization.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, workplace victimization has emerged as a very important area of research in occupational health psychology and management studies. Workplace victimization is defined as a situation in which one or more employees use either their words or actions or both against another, so as to cause physical or psychological harm in the work environment [1]. The phenomenon has been studied under different construct labels including abuse [2,3], interpersonal conflict [4], incivility [5], petty tyranny [6], social undermining [7], and bullying [8].

Workplace victimization can be perpetrated by both supervisors and coworkers, some of whom may be victims of bullying [9,10]. Acts of victimization at the workplace may range from minor abuses to major actions such as physical aggression, and are usually perpetrated to put the victim in an underprivileged position by adopting actions such as verbal aggression, criticisms, rumors, and humiliations [11]. These behaviors do not only affect the victims but also

have an adverse effect on the overall performance of organizations. For instance, bullying is known to cost organizations high employee turnover, expensive lawsuits, low employee commitment, employees' absence from work, and low employee job satisfaction [12–14]. On an individual level, workers are also affected physically, emotionally, and mentally with related health issues such as severe headaches, depression, and loss of appetite [15,16].

Much of extant research on antecedents of workplace victimization has focused on the role of the work environment and victims' personality traits. The work environment hypothesis suggests that workplace bullying can be traced to interpersonal conflict resulting from poor psychosocial working conditions [17]. Empirical research on this hypothesis has shown significant association between workplace victimization and a number of situational factors within the work domain [18,19]. An important factor in this regard is organizational politics, which is defined as "behaviors that occur on an informal basis within an organization and involve intentional acts of influence that are designed to protect or enhance individuals'

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professional careers when conflicting courses of action are possible" [20]. Empirically, Salin [21] found a positive relationship between employees' perception of organizational politics and bullying in the workplace. This means that the extent to which management allows or checks the occurrence of victimization amongst employees either encourages or deters perpetrators of such acts in the workplace [18,22]. More so, Vartia [23] in a research study on the sources of bullying also suggested that in a work environment where individuals seek their own interest (a sign of organizational politics), victimization of coworkers is likely to be dominant compared with settings where employees seek corporate interest instead of personal interests. Additionally, various researchers have noted that work climates that are politically manipulated are more prone to employee victimization [24,25]. Thus, victimization is more likely to occur in organizations characterized by weak systems of protecting and maintaining respect for employees, as well as nontransparent decision making [26].

Although studies on the work environment hypothesis have enhanced our understanding of the role of the organizational context in the occurrence of victimization, they have largely ignored the role of victims' characteristics such as personality as a potential precursor to victimization. While highlighting personality traits of victims may be seen as "blaming the victim" [27], there is evidence of a relationship between victimization and certain personality traits. Coyne et al [28] posited that in the work setting, employees who are prone to victimization are likely to be submissive, introverts, dependent, conscientious, and anxious. In contrast, employees with personality traits such as emotional reactivity, impulsivity, suspicion, and aggressiveness are more likely to victimize other employees in the workplace [29]. Additionally, Zapf [30] noted that lack of social skills associated with certain personality traits (e.g., introversion) may predispose employees to victimization in the workplace. Similarly, Glasø et al [31] reported that compared with nonvictims, victims of bullying tended to be conscientious, extraverted, neurotic, and less agreeable. More recently, Balducci et al [32] found that higher levels of neuroticism were associated with higher frequency of victimization.

However, most previous studies on the occurrence of workplace victimization have examined work environment factors and victims' personality traits independently. Einarsen et al [27] revealed that the occurrence of workplace victimization can be attributed to both individual characteristics and situational factors in the workplace. This underscores the need for empirical research to examine both sets of antecedents (i.e., individual and situational factors) simultaneously. To date, only a few studies have examined both personality characteristics and the organizational context in relation to victimization [9,26]. The present study adds to this burgeoning body of research on the organizational and individual antecedents of workplace victimization by examining the influences of personality traits and organizational politics on victimization. The study therefore tested the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1. Employee personality traits will be significantly associated with workplace victimization.
- Hypothesis 2. Organizational politics will be positively related to workplace victimization.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Sample and procedure

Participants for the study were recruited through convenience sampling. Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) students at a large public university in Ghana volunteered to distribute questionnaire packages to employees in their respective

Table 1
Participants' demographic characteristics

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	326	51.7
Female	305	48.3
Age		
18–24	59	9.4
25–34	292	46.3
35–44	170	26.9
45–54	88	13.9
≥ 55	22	3.5
Marital status		
Single	251	39.8
Married	380	60.2
Education		
Up to High School	50	7.9
Diploma	114	18.1
Bachelors	311	49.3
Postgraduate	156	24.7
Position		
Junior staff	214	33.9
Middle management	290	46.0
Senior management	127	20.1

organizations. Attached to each questionnaire was a cover letter that explained the objective of the study, assured respondents of confidentiality of their responses, and that participation in the survey was voluntary. Of 750 questionnaires that were distributed, 631 usable questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 84%. About 52% of the respondents were men and the majority (60.2%) were married. The median age was 25–34 years, with the majority (49.4%) of respondents within this age category. About 34% of the respondents were junior staff, 46% were in middle management positions, and about 20% were in senior management positions. In terms of level of education, the majority of the participants (74%) had at least a bachelor's degree. All the participants were full-time employees with average weekly working hours of 39.4 hours. A summary of the participants' demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

Personality was measured with a 10-item version of the Big Five Inventory (BF-44) developed by Rammstedt and John [33]. The 10-item Big Five Inventory (BF-10) consists of five subscales, which measure the five personality dimensions. Neuroticism (e.g., I see myself as someone who easily gets nervous), extraversion (e.g., I see myself as someone who is outgoing, sociable), conscientiousness (e.g., I see myself as someone who does a thorough job), openness (e.g., I see myself as someone who has an active imagination), and agreeableness (e.g., I see myself as someone who is generally trusting) were measured with two items each. Each item was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Based on separate English and German samples, Rammstedt and John [33] demonstrated that scores on each dimension on the BF-10 were strongly correlated with their respective dimensions on the original BF-44 ($r = 0.74–0.89$). Rammstedt and John [33] also reported average test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.75 over 6–8 weeks. Since the BF-10 consists of only two items per dimension, Cronbach α could not be computed for each personality factor in the present study.

Organizational politics was measured with the Perception of Organizational Politics Scale [34]. The Perception of Organizational Politics Scale is a unidimensional scale consisting of 12 items with responses rated on a five-point, Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither disagree nor agree; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree). The items were coded such that high

scores reflect a greater level of political behavior. A sample item is “In this organization it is safer to agree with management than to say what you think is right.” Cronbach α for this scale in the present study was 0.86.

Workplace victimization was measured with the Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised developed by Einarsen et al [35]. The Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised consists of 22 items designed to measure direct and indirect aspects of victimization. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they have been exposed to incidences of victimization over the previous 6 months. Responses to the items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale: Never, Now and then, Monthly, Weekly, and Daily. In the present study the Cronbach α reliability coefficient for the scale was 0.92. A sample item is “Someone withholding information which affects your performance.”

Demographic variables such as age, sex, marital status, level of education, and position in organization were included as control variables. Age was coded as 1 (18–24), 2 (25–34), 3 (35–44), 4 (45–54), and 5 (≥ 55); sex was coded as 1 (male) and 2 (female); marital status was coded as 1 (single) and 2 (married), and level of education was coded as 1 (high school education), 2 (polytechnic diploma/associate degree), 3 (bachelor’s degree), and 4 (post-graduate degree/professional qualification). Position in organization was dummy-coded into junior management, middle management, and senior management.

2.3. Data analysis

The data was analyzed in two stages. In the first stage we conducted descriptive statistics to examine mean levels of workplace victimization among participants in the study. Zero-order correlations were conducted to examine bivariate correlations among the variables in the study. In the second stage we performed hierarchical multiple regression analysis to examine the hypothesized relationships. Workplace victimization was regressed onto the control variables and the hypothesized correlates. The control variables were first entered into the regression equation, and then following an assumed order of causal priority we then entered the personality factors, and then organizational politics.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for the study variables are presented in Table 2. As shown in this table, the

mean level of victimization was low (mean = 1.94, standard deviation = 0.63), suggesting that few participants viewed victimization as a common occurrence at their places of work. Assessment of the prevalence rate of workplace victimization showed that 6.8% of the participants experienced victimization at least monthly within the previous 6 months. Table 2 also shows that workplace victimization was significantly correlated with sex (women: $r = 0.12, p < 0.05$), agreeableness ($r = 0.12, p < 0.05$), conscientiousness, ($r = -0.13, p < 0.05$) neuroticism ($r = 0.14, p < 0.05$), and organizational politics ($r = 0.44, p < 0.05$).

The results for the hierarchical multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 3. At Step 1 of the model, sex ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.05$) was significantly related to workplace victimization; the remaining demographic variables were not significantly related to victimization. This result suggests that women were more likely to experience victimization than men. However, together, the demographic variables failed to account for a significant amount of the variance in workplace victimization (adjusted $R^2 = 0.01, p > 0.05$). When

Table 3
Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis on correlates of workplace victimization

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Demographics			
Age	0.05	0.06	0.01
Level of education	0.02	0.02	0.03
Marital status (married)	-0.01	-0.01	-0.03
Sex (female)	0.12	0.11	0.07
Junior staff	-0.06	-0.06	-0.05
Middle management	-0.09	-0.09	-0.05
Senior management	-0.05	-0.04	0.04
Personality factors			
Extraversion		0.04	0.05
Agreeableness		0.00	-0.04
Conscientiousness		-0.09	-0.10*
Neuroticism		0.11*	0.05
Openness		0.00	0.02
Organizational factors			
Organizational politics			0.44 [‡]
ΔR^2		0.02	0.19
F for ΔR^2		3.18 [†]	147.99 [‡]
R^2	0.02	0.04	0.23
Adjusted R^2	0.01	0.02	0.22
F	1.65	2.41 [†]	15.47 [‡]

* $p < 0.05$.

[†] $p < 0.01$.

[‡] $p < 0.001$.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among study variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Victimization	1.94	0.63	–												
2 Age	2.52	0.91	0.02	–											
3 Level of education	2.97	0.78	0.03	0.09	–										
4 Marital status (married)	1.60	0.49	0.01	0.54	0.12	–									
5 Sex (female)	1.48	0.50	0.12	-0.16	0.06	-0.05	–								
6 Junior staff	0.32	0.47	-0.01	-0.42	-0.30	-0.34	0.03	–							
7 Middle management	0.44	0.50	-0.03	0.17	0.15	0.17	0.01	-0.61	–						
8 Senior management	0.18	0.39	0.02	0.31	0.16	0.22	-0.12	-0.32	-0.42	–					
9 Extraversion	3.34	0.88	-0.01	-0.03	0.09	-0.02	0.03	0.00	0.05	-0.08	–				
10 Agreeableness	3.65	0.85	-0.08	0.07	-0.02	-0.02	-0.10	0.00	-0.02	0.04	0.16	–			
11 Conscientiousness	3.93	0.85	-0.13	0.05	0.02	0.01	-0.06	-0.02	0.03	0.02	0.24	0.44	–		
12 Neuroticism	2.51	0.78	0.14	-0.05	-0.04	-0.05	0.09	0.07	-0.04	-0.03	-0.25	-0.37	-0.42	–	
13 Openness	3.36	0.66	-0.02	0.08	0.10	0.07	-0.02	-0.11	0.05	0.07	0.08	0.12	0.13	-0.11	–
14 Organizational politics	2.94	0.73	0.44	0.05	-0.04	0.04	0.09	0.06	0.01	-0.10	-0.03	0.04	0.00	0.10	-0.05

Absolute correlation coefficient ≥ 0.07 are significant at the 0.05 level or better. SD, standard deviation.

entered at Step 2 of the model, the personality variables accounted for an additional 2% of the explained variance in workplace victimization ($\Delta R^2 = 0.02$, $p < 0.05$). Of the personality factors, neuroticism ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$) was positively related to workplace victimization. However, agreeableness, extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness were not significantly associated with workplace victimization at Step 2. When entered at Step 3 of the model, organizational politics accounted for an additional 19% of the explained variance in workplace victimization ($\Delta R^2 = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$). As expected, organizational politics had a significant positive relationship with victimization ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$). Neuroticism, which was significant at Step 2 ceased to be significant at Step 3; conversely, conscientiousness ($\beta = -0.10$, $p < 0.05$), which was not related to victimization at Step 2, was found to be positively associated with victimization at Step 3. The overall model was significant and accounted for 22% of the variance in workplace victimization (adjusted $R^2 = 0.22$, $F_{13,617} = 15.47$, $p < 0.001$). In view of these results, the study's hypothesis that personality would be significantly associated with workplace victimization (Hypothesis 1) received limited support, whereas the hypothesis that organizational politics would be positively related to workplace victimization (Hypothesis 2) was supported.

4. Discussion

The main objective of this study was to examine the extent to which the personality traits of employees and organizational politics influence the experience of employee victimization in the workplace. Generally, the findings demonstrated that organizational politics and personality traits were associated with workplace victimization. However, organizational politics was found to have a stronger influence on victimization than personality traits of victims, suggesting that the perpetuation of workplace victimization is more defined by the organizational context than by individuals' personality traits.

In relation to personality traits (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness), the hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that only neuroticism and conscientiousness were significantly associated with victimization. The positive relationship between neuroticism and workplace victimization suggests that employees who are prone to victimization in the workplace are characterized as being more anxious and unstable. Consistent with McCrae and John's [36] assertion, such employees are more likely to experience victimization because they are noted to be emotionally insecure. The findings further confirm earlier studies by Vartia [23] and Hawker and Boulton [37] which also revealed that neurotic characteristics of employees such as low self-esteem, physical weakness, and shyness place them at a disadvantage when it comes to victimization.

The negative relationship between conscientiousness and victimization, while consistent with some previous research [31], is less intuitive. This finding would seem to contradict some recent studies suggesting a positive relationship between conscientiousness and bullying [38]. Kim and Glomb [38] showed that conscientiousness, as reflected through high levels job performance, is a potential precursor of aggression from colleagues and that "envy" functioned as a behavioral mechanism for this relationship. A possible explanation is that conscientious employees may be more determined and strong-willed, allowing them to better resist bullying from peers and superiors [10]. Taken together, the current study's findings partially deviate from the earlier assertion by Leymann [39] that the personality of employees is not a factor to be considered when determining the antecedents of victimization in the workplace. However, while both neuroticism and conscientiousness had significant relationships with victimization, the

overall impact of personality traits on victimization appears minimal.

Compared with personality traits, organizational politics emerged as a stronger influence on workplace victimization. This finding is in line with extant literature. For instance, according to Salin [21], the rate of occurrences of workplace victimization to a large extent depends on the politics prevailing in the organization. Thus, organizations that are reactive in dealing with victimization may have higher occurrences of employee victimization compared to proactive organizations [26]. Key characteristics to look out for in organizations that are prone to employee victimization include employees' tendency to seek their own interest instead of the corporate interest [23]. Additionally, a weak system of investigating, mitigating, and protecting potential victims might explain the finding of organizational politics being a strong predictor of workplace victimization [26].

It is also important to note from the demographic analysis that the sex of employees also determines whether or not employees become victims of bullying in the workplace. Findings from the study revealed that female employees are more prone to victimization compared with their male counterparts. However, little empirical studies have been done along this line to support this assertion. For instance, Zaykowski and Gunter [40] in a study revealed that sex is a significant predictor of victimization but further posited that less attention has, however, been given to the differences.

The present study has a number of limitations that need highlighting. One limitation concerns the correlational nature of the study, which precludes making causal inferences from the findings. Studies based on longitudinal data would help to establish the temporal order of the relationships examined in this study. Secondly, the sampling procedure (convenience sampling) adopted in this study poses significant constraints on the extent to which the study's findings can be generalized. Thirdly, although we examined personality characteristics of victims as potential correlates of workplace victimization, personality characteristics of both victims and perpetrators are likely to play a role in victimization. Future research in Ghana should examine the relative influences of victims' and perpetrators' personality characteristics in predicting workplace victimization. Finally, the study focused on main effect relationships and thus, does not account for why personality and organizational politics predicted workplace victimization. Future research examining such potential mediating variables would make significant contributions to understanding occurrence of workplace victimization.

In conclusion, the present study suggests that among the BF personality traits, neuroticism and conscientiousness were the only significant predictors of workplace victimization, although the relationships were weak. Thus, employees who are anxious, emotionally insecure, and less conscientious are more likely to experience workplace victimization compared with employees who are extraverts, agreeable, and open. However compared to individual antecedents of victimization (e.g., personality traits), organizational antecedents like organizational politics was found to be a stronger predictor of victimization. Hence, the pivotal focus of organizations in the quest to mitigate workplace victimization should be more towards organizational factors than on the personality trait of employees.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have nothing to disclose.

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