



Quality of work life, work motivation, job satisfaction and ethical behaviour

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Abstract

Ethical behaviour ensures employees follow organisational social norms in the conduct of their tasks and assignments. But studies have been somewhat silent on the individual-level factors influencing this positive work behaviour, especially in an African public sector context. Further, the contextual factors impacting ethical behaviour at work are yet to be fully known. Therefore, the study examined the relationship between quality of work life and work motivation on ethical behaviour given job satisfaction as a contextual factor. The study collected data from 191 mid-level employees in the Delta State Ministry of Health in Nigeria, and subjected same data to the PLS-SEM analytical procedure. The results demonstrated that job satisfaction and ethical behaviour are positively related, job satisfaction mediates quality of work life and work motivation relationship with ethical behaviour, and quality of work life relationship with ethical behaviour is mediated by work motivation and job satisfaction sequentially. The study concluded that the link between quality of work life and work motivation on ethical behaviour can be explained by the mediational mechanism of job satisfaction. The results imply that public organisations can support ethical behaviour when certain individual-level (psychological) factors are well positioned and managed to achieve desirable outcomes.

Keywords: Ethical behaviour, Job satisfaction, Motivation, Nigeria, Public sector, Work life quality.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study is among the first to integrate quality of work-life, work motivation, job satisfaction and ethical behaviour in a single research framework. The research framework explains how quality of work-life and work motivation relate to ethical behaviour given job satisfaction as a mediational mechanism.

1. Introduction

Today, ethical behaviour (EB) plays a central role in ensuring employees demonstrate acceptable moral standards in the execution of various tasks and assignments. But public sector employees often engage in or are confronted with an array of ethical infractions (e.g. rule bending or breaking, absenteeism, lying, bullying, harassment, nepotism, favouritism, incivility, leaking of sensitive information, document falsification, solicitation and acceptance of kickbacks and gifts, and other forms of financial inducements) at work. This has no doubt contributed to the erosion of public trust, as adherence to the highest ethical standards is central to the aim of public organisations (Van Roekel & Schott, 2022). The prevalence of unethical behaviour is often considered a leadership problem because leaders' behaviours and actions are primary influential models of ethical guidance for every employee in the workplace (Emery, 2016; Kim & Brymer, 2011; Selart & Johansen, 2011). As such, a strong ethical leadership should reinforce positive employees' attitude and behaviour, like EB, considerably (Hassan, Wright, & Yukl, 2014). While the efficacy of leadership as an organisational antecedent may prove true in this context, the ethicality of organisational members can be a function of the enhancement or breakdown of individual-level factors in the workplace. The antecedent roles played by these factors: job satisfaction (JS), work motivation (WM) and quality of work life (QWL), are of interest to this study.

JS is a psychological state arising from an employee's appraisal of his/her job, either in its totality or with respect to its different components. Studies have explicitly demonstrated EB prediction of employee JS (Abadiga, Nemera, Hailu, & Mosisa, 2019; Kaffashpoor & Sadeghian, 2020; Vitell & Davis, 1990) however, JS has increasingly been recognised as a determinant of productive work behaviours in organisations (Zhang, 2020) suggesting that the level of EB displayed at work may be indicative of the extent to which JS is attained. In other words, public organisations aiming to impact ethical decision making processes strongly may benefit from the enhancement of JS. The bidirectionality in effect shows that JS could have a predictive effect on EB, but scant attention has been given to the validity of this notion, especially in a public sector setting. This relationship is important because employees' JS levels may account for the persistent ethical problems and violations in the public sector. Thus, it will be necessary to determine the enabling factors to ensure high JS is developed and maintained. This leads to the selection of JS as a mediational construct accounting for EB.

WM has become a topical concern among researchers and practitioners in the past decade, in part, to the desire to maintain high JS levels, growing concern over the quality of work, and the notion that behavioural problems seem to be largely motivational in nature. According to Zayed et al. (2022) WM is "a collection of energetic factors that arise both within and beyond an individual's self to trigger work-related behaviour and to govern its shape, direction, intensity, and duration". It often stems from a need which must be appropriately satisfied, and this in turn leads to the demonstration of positive behaviours (Lambrou, Kontodimopoulos, & Niakas, 2010). This need defines the motivational orientation of employees in a specific morality context. Although, WM is a critical element of human behavioural responses and persistence, it interacts with other psychological processes to induce critical employee-related work outcomes, such as JS, work engagement, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour, innovative work behaviour, and other productive behaviours. Drawing from the self-determination theory (SDT), the innate tendency to exert and/or maintain effort towards goal attainment is an important factor that provides the needed energy for the formation of certain positive attitudes and behaviours to improve individual functionality in a specified work setting. If WM is critical to the pursuit of positive work-related behaviour, then its activation becomes a vital element of ethical enquiry. This has derived the need for the current study to investigate the notion that WM enhances JS to affect EB.

Given the significance of WM in fostering JS, it is important to determine other antecedent variable of JS, especially the ones that can make WM to provide the context for JS to influence EB among employees. QWL proves useful in this regard. This is because employees spend a greater part of their lives at work, and the associated work conditions and practices can be important motivational sources that convey meaning, satisfaction, commitment, engagement, and performance. QWL are perceptible organisational conditions and practices (e.g. remuneration, social integration, safe/healthy work conditions, etc.) that enables employees to have either a favourable or an unfavourable view about the quality of their work environment, and the perceived favourability and appropriateness of these organisational conditions, stemming from employees' participation at work, may foster positive or negative employee job-related behavioural outcomes (Khan, Mahmood, & Shoaib, 2022). This is to say that the significance of QWL in an organisational setting is unparalleled due to its probable link to WM, JS and EB. Given that QWL is directly related to WM (Ogbuabor & Okoronkwo, 2019) and to JS (Noor & Abdullah, 2012) the study argues that WM and JS are key psychological pathways for QWL to influence employees' EB significantly and positively. The validity of this notion appears to be an open research issue due to limited empirical information. Besides, this finding is highly relevant because organisations have a responsibility to develop the basic conditions allowing EB to flourish.

Summarily, the study while contributing to extant literature on the antecedents of EB, elucidated on WM and JS as mediational mechanisms for fostering EB with QWL. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this integrative research thinking from the combination of QWL, WM, JS and EB concepts is among the first to be explicitly articulated in a single study. Likewise, the operationalisation of WM and JS as mediational constructs remain largely unexplored in related studies, as the study believes both constructs can help demystify the intricacies related to EB in a public sector context. There is a lot of research explaining the consequences of EB, but much less is known about the antecedent and contextual variables that contribute to its development. This study can provide clarity by offering explanations on psychological factors influencing the occurrence of EB at work.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

EB represents scalable behaviours and actions of organisational members that adhere to widely acceptable moral and normative standards in performing official duty or assignment. The literature on organisational ethics clearly indicate that moral considerations are often overlooked in the public sector, leading to demonstration unethical behaviour which may induce significant costs for organisations. The Nigerian public sector has not been left unscathed by this observation because unethical behavioural practices still persist and continues to stymie sound moral values (Taiwo, 2015). One of the possible explanations for the widespread unethical behaviour may be the breakdown of the underlying psychological processes stimulating positive employees' behaviour at the workplace. This underscores the relevance of JS in reinforcing EB. It is argued that the accentuation of JS can help improve organisational functioning in ways that desirable outcome variables, like EB, are ensured. This surmises that the lack of JS may cultivate a dysfunctional culture of deviancy in the workplace. As discussed earlier, research has evidenced EB prediction of JS, however, not much is known about JS prediction of EB. The study aligns with the argument of Zhang (2020) that JS shapes employees' attitudes and behaviours, suggesting that JS can function in a predictive capacity in such relationship. Employees who are less satisfied with their jobs may likely engage in negative workplace behaviours that clearly violate established organisational norms and standards. This is true because low JS could cause employees not to subscribe to the application of ethical considerations in the discharge of certain tasks and/or assignment, and the attendant errors in judgement and discretion reduce employees' effectiveness in the actualisation of stated goals. In many ways, JS levels plays a central role in ethical decision making leading to (un)ethical behaviours. However, the relational strength between both constructs is determined by the interplay between human character, motivation and characteristics of the organisational contexts. The predictive effect of JS on the ethicality of organisational members was evidenced in an empirical study conducted by Zhang (2020) on workplace spirituality, JS and unethical pro-organisational behaviour. Besides, Resende and Porto (2020) state that unethical work decisions are influenced by individual characteristics such as motivation and JS. Based on this, the study developed the first hypothesis.

H1: JS-EB relationship is significant and positive.

Although, JS and EB are directly related, it can also be positioned as a contextual construct between other employee-related outcome variables. For instance, the study of Zhang (2020) applied JS as an intervening variable in the link between workplace spirituality and unethical pro-organisational behaviour, and the study found that JS mediation of this link was significant and positive. A similar result was also established in a recent study (Sopiah & Bernardes, 2022) on the effect of QWL on work engagement by the mediation of JS. While studies have shown QWL (Ishfaq, Al-Hajieh, & Alharthi, 2022; Khan et al., 2022; Noor & Abdullah, 2012; Sopiah & Bernardes, 2022) and WM (Lambrou et al., 2010; Zayed et al., 2022) positive and significant association with JS, the theory of planned action (TPA) suggests that antecedents of JS are attitudes reinforcing such perceptible behavioural intent, and subjective norm. If the antecedents of JS are integrated to predict EB, the prediction of EB as a desired outcome will be significant and positive over time. This is to say that ethical actions are predicated by planned behaviour (Weber & Gillespie, 1998) one of which is to better JS. If the antecedents (QWL and WM) fostering JS are rightly activated, employees will be able to demonstrate EB in the execution of tasks and assignments. Because JS is an immediate determinant of EB than QWL and WM, the study claims that the stronger the level of JS achieved in the specified relationships, the stronger the probability that the employee will engage in EB. However, the likelihood that the antecedents will lead to high JS is determined by how well organisations provide work resources and conditions that enable employees to develop QWL and WM to stimulate JS accordingly. Given that JS can be applied as a predictor and an outcome variable in research involving employee behaviours (Zhang, 2020) the study contends that JS concretised in QWL and WM determines EB. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: JS mediates the significant and positive QWL-EB relationship.

H3: JS mediates the significant and positive WM-EB relationship.

QWL as an important component of positive psychology reflects employees' perception of the connections between work characteristics and individual self-concept, and provides intrinsic motivational force to direct employees' choices, behaviour and performance. Studies convey that QWL is directly related to JS (Ishfaq et al., 2022; Noor & Abdullah, 2012) and QWL factors are closely related to WM (Ogbuabor & Okoronkwo, 2019) however, QWL can also sequentially improve WM and JS to affect EB in a significant and positive manner. Drawing from the control theory, organisations can manage or regulate work behaviours better when they provide a quality work environment that fits the needs of its employees, and employees, in turn, will feel more satisfied by the provision of motivational resources at work. Following the norms of reciprocity, the experience of JS from a resourceful and motivating work environment will minimise the tendency of engaging in ethical misconducts. Using the SDT theory to argue further, a reduction in the variation between workplace qualities and employees' existential needs/values can strengthen employees' motivational commitment to work. Because employees are presumed to be in a psychologically rewarding exchange relationship, the satisfaction of employees' existential needs would foster sustainable positive work behaviour. This appears to suggest that employees may behave in ways reflective of the quality of relationship with their organisation and work itself. If employees perceive the relationship as reciprocal, they may display behaviours conforming to organisational norms. Conversely, if the reciprocity is uneven, they may develop negative behaviours to balance the unsatisfactory feeling. Given the above arguments, it is possible that an unsuitable work setting can turn WM to a psychological burden if QWL is not improved to a certain extent, and this can indirectly diminish any gains in JS attained in the workplace. If not properly managed, the gradual attenuation of JS would contribute to the manifestation of negative work behaviour, like unethical behaviour. Thus, we hypothesise that:

H4: QWL-EB significant and positive relationship is sequentially mediated by WM and JS.

To understand how EB becomes manifest in the workplace, the study must examine and test the integrative nature of direct and indirect sources of EB as presented in the research model in Figure 1.

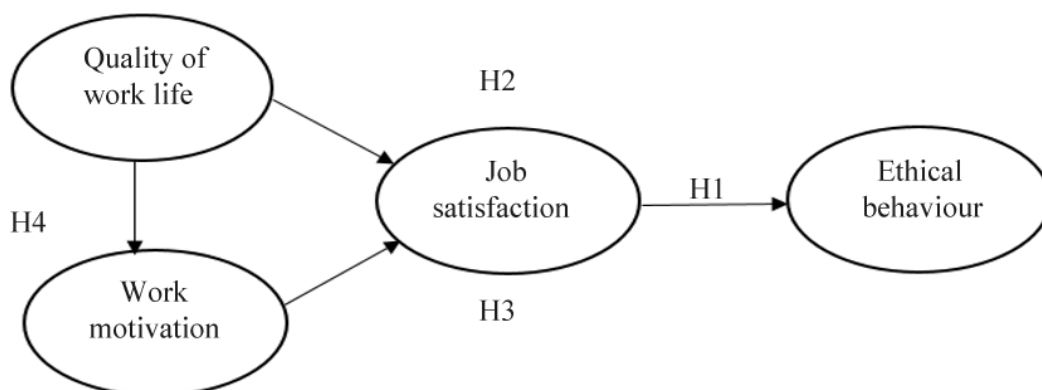


Figure 1. Hypothesised research model.

3. Method

The study recruited participants from the Ministry of Health in Delta State, Nigeria through convenient sampling. This sampling technique was selected due to the availability of respondents to willingly respond to the survey probe during working hours. This happens to be a very busy ministry. Although an approval was obtained from the Commissioner of Health prior to questionnaire administration, the researchers endeavoured to secure an informed consent for voluntary participation in this study. The sampled staff, consisting of mid-level staff between grade levels 13 to 15, were selected because of their vantage position in the organisation. They are guided by the behaviours of top-level staff through observation and modelling, as well as providing guidance to those in the lower cadre by their modelled work behaviours. The respondents' consent were given verbally after going through the research aims and confidentiality statement in the covering letter attached to the questionnaire. The researchers provided guidance and clarifications to respondents when needed during the exercise. The questionnaire administration and collection were performed by the researchers on site for a two months period, beginning from the month of October to December. The estimated questionnaire completion time was 10 minutes. At the end of the exercise, the researchers collected 191 questionnaire; all the questionnaire were deemed usable for data analysis due to no missing values. Regarding the demographic profile of respondents, 103 are male and 88 are female. The respondents' age ranged from 33 to 54 years. All the respondents are graduates with a minimum of B.Sc. qualification. The mean tenure of the respondents was 14.2 years.

The measures used in the questionnaire were taken and adapted from the investigations of past studies. QWL scale was taken from [Ishfaq et al. \(2022\)](#). This composite scale has 20 question items measuring QWL dimensions comprising physical work environment, relations and cooperation, training and development, compensation and rewards, and autonomy at work. This scale was rated on a five-point likert scale of strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Cronbach alpha for QWL scale was 0.783. 9 question items were taken from [Shouksmith \(1989\)](#) scale for measuring WM. Sample items include: "job is challenging and exciting" and "job develops potentials". WM scale was rated on a five-point likert scale of strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Cronbach alpha for QWL scale was 0.899. The single item measure of JS was taken from [Moon and Jung \(2018\)](#) to capture the overall emotional response of an employee to his or her job. The sample item is "considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job". This scale was rated on a five-point Likert scale of highly satisfied (5) to highly dissatisfied (1). Cronbach alpha for JS scale was .711. The 4 question items of EB was adapted from [Weber and Gillespie \(1998\)](#) in line with Rest's ethical decision model. The question items include: "In the past, I have encountered ethically challenging situations involving organisational members", "I know what ought to be done in such work situations", "I intend to make the right choice(s) in such work situations" and "In such situations, my actions conform to the ethical standards of my organisation". This scale was rated on a five-point likert scale of strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Cronbach alpha for EB scale was .724.

The partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique was used as the analytical tool for data treatment and hypothesis testing. This SEM technique was performed with the popular SmartPLS 3.2.7 software. The PLS-SEM is highly suitable for mediational analysis and also for latent constructs having a single-item measure like JS. The two-step procedure to PLS-SEM was adopted to test sequentially the measurement model (outer model) and structural model (inner model). Further, the specific indirect effect test was performed to establish the mediation effects in the structural model. The bootstrap technique using 5000 subsamples was applied to assess the significance of the hypothesised paths in the structural model. The rule of thumb espoused in [Hair, Hult, Ringe, and Sarstedt \(2017\)](#) was used for interpretation of PLS results.

4. Results and Discussion

Firstly, the study performed a measurement model estimation to establish validity and reliability of latent constructs. [Table 1](#) shows the results of the measurement model, and the resulting values exceeded the acceptable cut-off values recommended by [Hair et al. \(2017\)](#). Factor loadings (FL) were greater than 0.707, suggesting a good item reliability. The composite reliability (CR) values were greater than 0.70, demonstrating satisfactory construct reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) scores were above the minimum score of 0.50, evidencing adequate convergent validity. The Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity shows that each construct's correlation was greater than the inter-construct correlations, suggesting discriminant validity was achieved. Given the results of the quality criteria presented above, the measurement model was deemed satisfactorily to proceed to the second step, which involves the estimation of the structural model.

Table 1. Measurement model estimates.

Construct	Items	FLs range	CR	AVE	QWL	WM	JS	EB
QWL	20	0.719 – 0.858	0.756	0.651	0.827			
WM	9	0.738 – 0.822	0.848	0.747	0.129	0.804		
JS	1	1.000	1.000	1.000	0.114	0.104	1.000	
EB	4	0.773 – 0.792	0.736	0.689	0.215	0.245	0.119	0.795

Table 2. Structural model estimates.

H	Path	Beta value	P-value	Decision
1	JS → EB	0.296	0.000	Support
2	QWL → JS	0.148	0.000	Support
	QWL → JS → EB	0.120	0.000	
3	WM → JS	0.193	0.000	Support
	WM → JS → EB	0.136	0.000	
4	QWL → WM	0.221	0.000	Support
	QWL → WM → JS → EB	0.124	0.000	

Note: P < 0.05; JS R² = 0.281; EB R² = 0.434

Table 2 shows the estimates and the decisions of each hypothesised relationship of the structural model. The R² score for JS shows that QWL and WM accounted for 28.1 percent variation in JS, and the R² score for EB shows that QWL, WM and JS accounted for 43.4 percent variation in EB. H1 argues that JS-EB relationship is significant and positive, and the PLS-SEM result ($\beta = 0.296, p = 0.000$) confirmed that this argument holds true. Thus, H1 was supported, which agrees with the position of past studies (Resende & Porto, 2020; Zhang, 2020) that JS as an individual characteristic or factor has a strong predictive value on ethical choices or decisions of organisational members. As such, high levels of JS enables employees to display exemplary EB at work. H2 and H3 suggest that JS mediates the significant and positive QWL-EB and WM-EB relationships, and the specific indirect results for JS mediation of QWL-EB ($\beta = 0.120, p = 0.000$) and WM-EB ($\beta = 0.136, p = 0.000$) prove these suggestions are valid. Thus, H2 and H3 were accepted. The findings somewhat concurs with recent studies (Sopiah & Bernardes, 2022; Zhang, 2020) that positioned JS as a significant mediation construct in relationships involving work behaviours. Further, the findings aligns with the arguments drawn from TPA that QWL and WM are psychological antecedence reinforcing JS as a perceptible behavioural intention enhancing employees EB. Therefore, QWL and WM are conceptually aligned with JS as psychological processes that enable employees to engage in behaviours that clearly follows organisational norms and standards.

H4 states that QWL-EB significant and positive relationship is sequentially mediated by WM and JS, and the specific indirect result ($\beta = 0.124, p = 0.000$) provides the needed statistical evidence validating this statement. Thus, H3 was confirmed. The sequential mediation of WM and JS in this relationship is a new contribution to extant literature, however, the finding concurs with the assumptions drawn from the control theory and the SDT theory in the literature review and hypotheses development section. Further, when comparing the results of H2 and H4, it can be argued that QWL-EB relationship can be optimised when the psychological constructs of WM and JS are both applied in a sequence. Thus, it seems very likely that an employees with high QWL may easily access WM factors which enables him or her to experience a significant degree of JS, and this improved levels of JS causes employees to feel satisfied in engaging in EB. These results, as summarised in the research model in Figure 2, highlight significant pathways for enhancing and maintaining EB in the workplace.

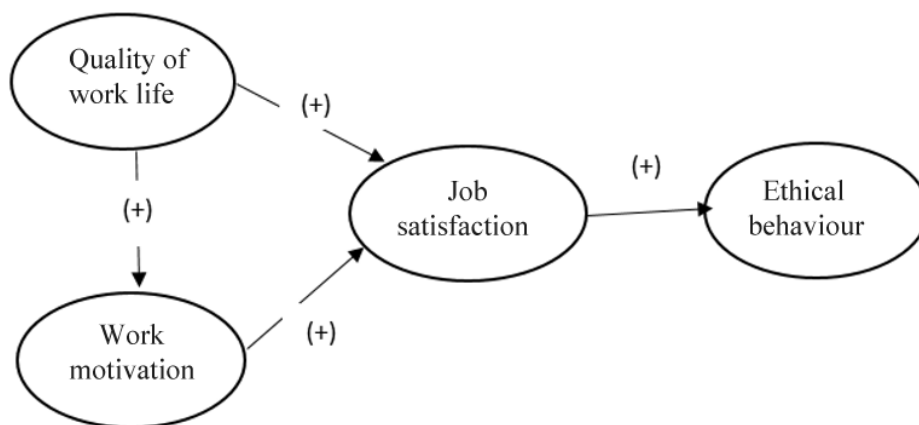


Figure 2. Research model.

5. Conclusion

The study examined the relationship between quality of work life, work motivation, job satisfaction and ethical behaviour. In doing so, data were collected from 191 mid-level employee working in the Delta State Ministry of Health, and subjected to the PLS-SEM analytical approach. From the PLS-SEM results, the study concluded that job satisfaction and ethical behaviour are positively and significantly related, proving the predictive effect of job satisfaction on ethical behaviour. Further, JS accounts for the way in which quality of work life and work motivation modulate employees' ethical behaviour. Finally, the dual mediation of work motivation and job satisfaction create an optimal link between quality of work-life and ethical behaviour. The results imply that public organisations can support ethical behaviour at work when certain individual-level (psychological) factors are well positioned and managed to achieve desirable outcomes. Specifically, the study recommends that public organisations should regularly gauge employees' job satisfaction levels given its centrality in facilitating positive work behaviour. The ensuing knowledge will allow for the implementation of timely and targeted interventions for continuous improvement of job satisfaction components. Further, since work motivation enables employees to feel

more satisfied making ethical choices, work motivation activation can be a useful organisational intervention to encourage ethical considerations in employees' decision making process. An assessment can be carried out in this regard to identify the motivating factors that employees hold dear. Lastly, while we recognise that the effectiveness of quality of work-life factors is context-specific vis-à-vis industry and work setting, public organisations can consider the holistic effect of quality of work-life factors (comprising physical work environment, relations and cooperation, training and development, compensation and rewards, and autonomy at work) to engender behavioural change necessary for the display of ethical behaviour. For the purpose of future research, studies of this nature can be extended to other organisations and regions in Nigeria to improve the generality of findings. Further, respondents' specific characteristics (gender, work experience, age, employment status, etc.) can help in drawing concrete and meaningful inferences.

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