




AUXILIARIES AND SUPERVISORS AT WAR: THE SPILLOVER EFFECT OF SUPERVISOR-SUBORDINATE AGGRESSION ON UNIVERSITY STAFF PRODUCTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

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Using Kampala International University (KIU) as a study sample, the study inquired into the effect of the continued use of aggression on employee productivity. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected sequentially using a mixed method sequential approach. A sample size of 108 senior academic staff was used for numerical data, while 10 key informants were selected for qualitative interviews. Findings revealed that when all the four parameters of X were taken together, explained only 22.1% variation in Y (adjusted $r^2 = 0.221$). Again, a unit increase in any of the predictors was accompanied by an inverse reaction in the predicted variable, and for this reason, the multiple linear regression model was insignificant ($F. = 55.361, p. = 0.088 > 0.05$). However, unlike the quantitative data, interview responses indicated that whereas retaliation is counterproductive, it has been a potential recipe for growth in some instances although at a negligible scale. Qualitative data further revealed that the impact of aggression consistently reduces with a consistent corresponding increase in positive reinforcement such as bonuses, prompt monthly pay, and staff development schemes. Since employee satisfaction and organizational success complement each other, the study recommends a balanced approach that aligns organizational interests with employee needs and aspirations for a productive working environment.

Contribution/Originality: Although there is relentless debate about the constituents of aggressive supervision, there is little disagreement that this field is sparsely researched. That being the case, this novel inquiry is set out to work as an interdisciplinary bridge that fosters a connection of research to practice and practice to research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although there is a reasonable body of literature on employee behavioral reaction towards supervisor aggression, what makes employees react constructively or destructively in response to aggression is not entirely clear (Marie & Maureen, 2012). Previous studies recognize the fact that supervisor-aggressive behavior is counterproductive (Glomb & Liao, 2003; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Tepper, 2000) but an attempt to justify why and when victims are likely to respond to supervisor aggression constructively or destructively is not provided in the desired amount (Fred, Asumwa, & Sophia, 2019; Tepper, 2007). It is regrettable that despite decades of research, cases of aggression at the workplace are still on the rise and efforts to calm the tempers are seemingly misplaced. Reports indicate that today's workplace is often perceived as harsh and arduous where subordinates engage in deceitful work behavior due to continuous abuse by the organizational authorities (Marie & Maureen, 2012). Relatedly, Pachter (2003); Fisher (2005); Thelen (2009) and Fred et al. (2019) support the view that

supervisor-subordinate aggression at work is the gateway to organizational decadency. While this may be a truism, attempts to understand why supervisors usually respond aggressively to certain situations at the workplace, is still undergoing empirical testing.

Previous researchers seem to believe that the observable unethical interpersonal treatment between the supervisor and subordinate is triggered by the supervisory mandate and immunity supervisors always enjoy over their subordinates (Fred et al., 2019; Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007; Mackey, McAllister, & Alexander, 2021). It should be remembered that since supervisors have control over things that are of value to subordinates' work lives; they (subordinates) intentionally protest their supervisors' formal authority which in turn triggers a reciprocal aggressive response from the supervisors in demand for compliance and obedience. Premised on this reality, it may be wise to conclude that there may be no moment in the world of practice where supervisors and supervisees live in an everlasting harmony, for as long as supervisees feel disenfranchised, feud will always persist. On various occasions, subordinates have proved impossible to lead, often create camps in attempts to out-do their supervisors whenever their performance is questioned, and use all possible means to discolor supervisors' names as a strategy to conceal their incompetency for survival (Henry, Marcella, & Simon, 2016; Steph, 2018).

While efforts to solve this paradox are reactive in the business world, those in higher education (HE) are proactive and research-based. University academics have for long been engaged in psychological research to scientifically understand under what circumstances can ivory towers rise above the chaotic working environments. Whereas this has been the case, attempt to thoroughly understand the phenomenon and provide feasible solutions to the vice is still a daunting enterprise. Reports of supervisor-subordinate conflict are still on the rise, the working environment is overwhelmingly becoming toxic, uncertain, unpredictable, and attempts to out-do one another for survival is the order of the day (Fred & Augustine, 2021; Henry et al., 2016).

In the conceptual perspective of this study, supervisor-subordinate aggression refers to the continual demonstration of unfriendly verbal and non-verbal responses by the supervisor on the subordinates (Fred et al., 2019; Marie & Maureen, 2012; Steph, 2018). This study limits the scope of aggression to only displaced aggression where frustration is directed to wrong people, retaliation where the victim strikes back to the transgressor in an aggressive response, and withdrawal where the victim chooses to ignore the transgressor for various reasons (Inness, Barling, & Turner, 2005; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

While on the other hand, productivity looks at efficiency and effectiveness in teaching, researching, and external community engagements as the cardinal parameters of teachers' productivity in universities (Xiaocheng (2010) and Anumaka and Ssemugenyi (2013). Although in the general sense, productivity refers to the ratio between a measure of output and inputs, in the academic context however, quantitative measures may not appropriately guide one to holistically appreciate productivity. Therefore, qualitative parameters have equally been used in this study to appreciate productivity from a service point of view.

1.1. Problem Statement

Despite decades of research, the available body of literature on aggressive supervision does not come out clearly to guide practice (Fred et al., 2019). It is still unclear why subordinates and supervisors would forego harmony for destructive actions. Although several psychological researchers have endeavored to dig into the details of this puzzle for an informed guidance, little or no convincing evidence is adduced yet (CIPD, 2015). The majority of practitioners think that productivity is unachievable in a chaotic working environment (Smith, 2017; Steph, 2018) due to its perceived negative connotation on employee-morale (Burke, 2017). Whether this is true or not, what is indisputable is the fact that most researchers have simplistically concluded that chaos is negative because of its perceived destructive nature without necessarily investigating it (Prince, Samuel, Benjamin, and Wilson (2015). Reports show that in HE where the actors are expected to be in full control of these turbulences the situation is instead getting dire; the working environment is overwhelmingly becoming toxic, uncertain, and unpredictable, as

subordinates and supervisors continue to fight each other year in year out. While examining the work lives of supervisors and subordinates at KIU in Uganda, the researcher attempted to investigate under what circumstances can employees respond destructively or constructively to the perceived aggressive behavior of the supervisor and what impact does aggressive reaction have on employee productivity.

1.2. Null Hypotheses (H_0)

It is hypothesized in this study that; antecedents such as retaliation, displaced aggression, and psychological withdrawal do not significantly affect staff productivity at KIU.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is a great deal of debate about the constructs that constitute aggressive supervision in a university context, there is little disagreement that displaced aggression, retaliation, and psychological withdrawal are integral components of the said supervision. Important to note is the fact that, aggressive supervision is a powerful term in industrial psychology that is widely researched but, often, not well understood (Lam, Walter, & Huang, 2017; Qu, Todorova, Dasborough, & Shi, 2017). The majority of practitioners are persuaded to believe that this kind of supervision is detrimental to progress, and a destabilization to organizational culture (Blase & Blase, 2007; Steph, 2018). Whereas their submissions may be regarded as a truism, what is indisputable is the fact that researchers and practitioners use the destructive nature of aggressive supervision to conclude that all forms of aggression are counterproductive with little or no proof of any scientific investigation. This study takes stock of these methodological and conceptual gaps in pursuit of a logical position.

2.1. The Effect of Retaliation on Productivity

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that retaliation is a primary response to aggression (Marie & Maureen, 2012; Nea, 2013). However, a handful of studies theorize that retaliation is a personality disorder that strikes without being provoked (Lewis & Ridenour, 2017; Triebwasser, Chemerinski, Roussos, & Siever, 2013). This sounds to reason that whereas employees may justifiably retaliate, some do it for the sake of doing it. In the organizational literature, it is mentioned that retaliation gives an opportunity to the victim to strike back to the transgressor (Skarlicki & Folger, 2004) but it remains sparse and anecdotal as evidence to why some employees respond destructively while others constructively is not clear.

A proliferation of research in this domain indicates that retaliation is one of the widely present employee responses to aggression that leads to low productivity, deviance, and psychological job-and non-job-related consequences (Nea, 2013). Consistently, Kellowayet, Svanathan, Francis, and Barling (2004) and Burke (2017) observe that retaliation is a reciprocal form of frustration that counters any form of perceived injustice at the workplace. While most researchers perceive retaliatory behaviors counterproductive, researchers such as Bies, Tripp, and Kramer (1997); Skarlicki and Folger (2004) and Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) negate such claims. They postulate that, retaliation in many cases breeds ceasefire when the victims' reciprocal response threatens the transgressors' tenure. Bies et al. (1997) specifically indicate in their theoretical framework on the cognitive and social "thermodynamics" of revenge that retaliatory reactions do not necessarily cause destruction to the organizations rather, an opportunity for growth and change in pursuit of a common cause.

In African-based universities for example, cases of retaliatory behaviors are scarce but a few that are citable are indeed destructive in nature. For example, a renowned academic at Makerere University (Dr Stella Nyanzi) stripped off her clothes in public in retaliation against injustice (Esther, 2016). In the same regard, a group of young academics at KIU who rose against impunity, injustice, and blatant arrogance in 2010 were all discontinued and they reciprocated by dragging the University to court for justice (Simbeye, 2012). Although chaos may be regarded as a constant construct in human existence, it is always detrimental to progress, and productivity (Rhonda, 2014).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, (Agbo, 2020) identified a plausible reverse causation where progress and productivity become true predictors of chaos rather than the reverse. This divergence in reasoning was later supported by the prominent researchers in the field of psychology such as; Tepper (2000) and Trotter et al. (2009). A majority of researchers though still think that chaotic working environments are disastrous, counterproductive, and never good for anything (Hinkin & Tracey, 2010; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). In part, this study endeavors to explore the suspected inverse relationship where researchers and practitioners seem to have limited evidence. It further examines the circumstances under which subordinates of the same supervisor may have similar or different perception of abuse, and whether the said abuse has a direct connotation on their behaviors and work productivity.

2.2. The Effect of Displaced Aggression on Productivity

Displaced aggression refers to retaliatory aggression that is misdirected from an initial source of provocation and turned instead upon an innocent other (Denson, Pedersen, & Miller, 2006). Although studies on displaced aggression are in short supply, available evidence indicates that displaced aggression occurs when aggressing against the transgressor is not a viable alternative (Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). Research further provides strong evidence that fear of retaliation intensifies displaced aggression and inhibits retaliatory aggression (Marie, 2006). It is further reported that, displaced aggression is more likely to happen when the transgressors are unavailable for a direct confrontation (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Thomaes, Bushman, & Telch, 2013).

In HE for example, research on displaced aggression has not received prominence, however, it is important to note that, research output in similar areas such as workplace deviance, physical aggression, retaliation, verbal abuse, withholding effort among others have received much attention and they all present elements of displaced aggression (Spector & Fox, 2005). Despite terminology differences, they however, present a number of common themes and often use identical measurement scales (Spector & Fox, 2005; Spector. et al., 2006). This implies that, understanding one of them means understanding all of them. In this regard therefore, cases of displaced anger in studies of workplace aggression are demonstrated in sufficient numbers and are studied under a variety of labels.

At KIU for example, cases of intentional actions that are directed to innocent subordinates (displaced anger) are listed in numbers (Sahara Reporters, 2020). Uncalled for cases of employee abuse, abrupt job rotation and employee transfers, and termination have been common since 2016. Whereas job rotation and employee transfers are regarded as best practices in management sciences (Mlekus & Maier, 2021) at KIU the intention of the transgressors is to frustrate the employees. Supervisors suffer from intermittent explosive disorder (IED) associated with sudden episodes of unwarranted anger. This anger overload is always directed to innocent and vulnerable subordinates who in many cases fear to retaliate for reasons beyond their control. This form of destructive leadership creates an environment of fear and insecurity where supervisors use power to enforce their unethical agenda through coercion and control (Padilla et al., 2007).

2.3. The Effect of Psychological Withdrawal on Productivity

Psychological withdrawal is a term commonly applied in human science to refer to a form of symptomatology that involves emotional and motivational features. They include anxiety, depression, delusion, and hallucination (Kristina, 2020). However, in this study context, it refers to a situation where employees psychologically and/or physically disengage from the organization. The physical withdrawal is demonstrated through absenteeism, resignation, and tardiness while psychological takes stock of passive compliance, laziness, loafing, burnout, and indifference to organizational cause (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Pinder, 2008; Trotter et al., 2009). Reports from China indicate that, Chinese firms are no longer faced with delay in mission completion; staff capacity among others, rather a worrying trajectory in work withdrawals due to work stress across firms (Zu, Zhang, & Wu, 2015). Correspondingly, Rabindra and Mendonca (2002) attest that withdrawal behavior is a grave impediment to

innovation, organizational growth and success. They further observe that; the withdrawal behaviors create a physical and psychological distance between employees and the organization that is detrimental to innovation and organizational effectiveness. These remarks mirror the scholarly works of Carmeli (2005); Hart (2005); Johns (2003); Koslowsky (2009) and Ulrich et al. (2007) which postulate that, withdrawal behavior is unhealthy and counterproductive at the same time. However, despite this position, previous studies such as Hackett and Bycio (1996) and Staw and Oldham (1978) are of the view that withdrawal behaviors do not always have exclusively detrimental effects on an organization. They argue that withdrawal behaviors give employees the chance to break from routine and stress thereby allowing themselves an opportunity to revitalize themselves for higher order challenges at work.

In HE for example, cases of emotional exhaustion and the eventual withdrawal behaviors are noticeable (Gorji & Vaziri, 2011; Marmaya, Zawawi, Hitam, & Jody, 2011). While academics withdrawal for various reasons, the most common ones are associated with supervisors' arrogance, indifference, and hostility (Fred, Conrad, & Judith, 2013). Consistently, Kelloway et al. (2004) observes that since employees' opinions and advice are always considered negative and detrimental to progress, academics at KIU have resorted to a psychological withdrawal warfare where HoD have intentionally distanced themselves from the perceived transgressors/supervisors for safety reasons. To an idealist, this action is healthy because it negates violence (Dean & Haifa, 2002) however, to a realist; it is detrimental to organizational progress. The University is bound to lose its vitality because the would-be employees to drive it to greater heights are consistently withdrawing their support and callously becoming indifferent to its interests and objectives.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design because the researcher intended to collect data from respondents at a single point in time (Amin, 2005; Jude, 2007). This design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to elicit data about attitude that would be otherwise difficult to obtain using observational techniques (McIntyre, 1999). For reliability and validity purposes, data could only be adequately collected through a sequential explanatory mixed method approach where quantitative data were collected first and followed by the qualitative data as a cross-verification strategy to increase control, generalizability, confidence, and validity of the study findings (Fred & Augustine, 2021). Numerical data were collected using a Five-Point Likert Scale questionnaire which had four sections of close-ended questions while an interview guide with open-ended questions was applied to the key informants respectively. Triangulating data was necessary in the sense that, the weaknesses of one approach could easily be offset by the strength of another (Fred & Augustine, 2021). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to measure the reliability of the instrument and the overall reliability coefficient was 0.813. Implying that the items provided in the instrument were reliable, stable, and consistent.

3.1. Population and Sample Size

The target population included only the academic staff (Senior Lectures, Associate Professors, and Professors) based at KIU main campus. Data obtained from the Human Resource Department (HRD) showed that the total population of the Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors, and Professors at the time of this inquiry stood at 146. Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Sample Size Determination Matrix, a sample size of 108 was considered to be a true statistical representation of 146. In addition, a simple random sampling method which gives every participant an equal chance and likelihood of being selected for the study was applied as one of the possible ways to minimize bias. The good news about this method is that, every sample has the same probability of being chosen (Olive, Mugenda, & Mugenda, 2003).

For the interviews, 15 heads of department (HoDs) were targeted as key informants for this study. With this group, the researcher could easily verify the validity of the quantitative data while using interviews as a cross-

verification benchmark. Triangulation of data helps in bringing out a comprehensive understanding of phenomena under investigation (Patton, 1999). It unearths in-depth dimensions which Likert-based questionnaires are unable to yield. At the time of this inquiry, KIU main campus had over 15 HoDs across the 6 academic colleges and schools but the researcher was only able to access 10 interviewees from the two largest colleges (e.g., College of Economics and Management, and College of Education, Open, and Distance Learning). The good news is that, 10 interviewees would sufficiently offer a true statistical representation of the whole colleges and schools. The names of the participants were provided as pseudonyms (e.g., CEM1, CEM2, CEM3, CEM4, CEM5, and CEODL1, CEODL2, CEODL3, CEODL4, & CEODL5) to avoid any unnecessary inconvenience to the participants.

3.2. Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria are defined as the key features of the target population that the investigators use to answer the research questions (Hulley, Cummings, Browner, Grady, & Newman, 2007). These key features specify the characteristics that people in the population must possess in order to be included in the study (Pilot & Hungler, 1999). In this study for example, four categories of staff took prominence (e.g., the Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors, Professors, and HoDs) of KIU main campus. Again, within these four categories further delineation was applied to limit the number of participants to the intended target group. Only those with five and above years of working experience with KIU were eligible for this study. The fact that, strife between supervisors and supervisees is widely reported among these categories (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) the study chose to pay much attention to this segment of the population.

3.3. Data Analysis

The researcher had hypothesized that supervisors' aggressiveness does not statistically and significantly affect subordinates' work productivity at KIU. This hypothesis was further broken down into three micro hypotheses each addressing a particular construct (e.g., retaliation, displaced aggression, and psychological withdrawal). Since the study was much more interested in establishing the predictive power of X on Y, as well as the assumed linearity between variables, regression analysis was adopted as a suitable tool for analysis. It was fit to explain variability in Y and to track the rate at which Y changes with changes in each of the included independent variables in the regression model. To determine if the included variables had a better prediction, the R^2 (single linearity) and the adjusted R^2 (multiple linearity) were used as best fit of determination with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS -version 16.0).

A Five-Point Likert Scale questionnaire that gives respondents an option to be neutral rather than having to choose an alternative that doesn't reflect their thinking (Johns, 2005; Lozano, García-Cueto, & Muñiz, 2008) was utilized in this study purposely to control the margin of error that is usually associated with other Likert scales (Amin, 2005). To increase study validity and generalizability, numerical data were triangulated with interviews for cross-verification and reliability. The quantitative data were collected first and followed by the qualitative interviews

All interview sessions were transcribed for purposes of identifying and developing patterns, codes, and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After a careful examination of the key informants' interviews, responses were categorized in three themes basing on their unique features that were reverberating through them. They included; triggered irritation (TI) for hypothesis one, misplaced frustration (MF) for hypothesis two, and minded-reactionary (MR) for hypothesis three. Interview responses are reported in this study in accordance with these themes and codes.

3.4. Response and Non-Response Rate

Response rate which is sometimes referred to as retrieval rate is used to measure data reliability and quality. It is the total number of completed questionnaires/interview divided by the total number of participants with whom

contact was made (Fincham, 2008; Mitchell, 1989). The target sample for quantitative data was 108, randomly picked from 146. Due to unavoidable circumstances, a handful of responses from the target sample were not obtained, but a significant percentage was retrieved. Out of 108 distributed questionnaires, 93 were retrieved with all items filled by the respondents, 8 questionnaires had between 2-5 items unanswered, yet 7 questionnaires were neither returned nor retrieved by the researcher. As per this breakdown, the response rate before data analysis stood at 86% ($93/108 \times 100$).

For the interviews, 15 HoDs were primarily targeted as key informants for this study, but only 10 were available and willing to share their opinion with the researcher. Their responses were transcribed for patterns, codes, and themes as a requirement for qualitative data analysis. The response rate for interviews was equally significant and statistically representational ($10/15 \times 100$). Whereas 66% response rate for interviews was at the borderline, it is widely accepted as reliable (Brick & Kalton, 1996; Fincham, 2008; Mitchell, 1989).

4. RESULTS

Findings of this study are presented in accordance with the independent constructs of the predictor variable (e.g., retaliation, displaced aggression, and “psychological withdrawal”). The impact of each construct on the predicted variable is numerically provided together with the corresponding interview responses from the key informants.

4.1. The Effect of Subordinates' Retaliatory Reaction on Work Productivity

It had been hypothesized by the researcher that; subordinates' retaliatory reaction does not significantly affect their own work productivity. To prove whether or not subordinate retaliation predicts work productivity; the said null hypothesis was tested. The regression results are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Simple linear regression analysis on the effect of subordinates' retaliatory reaction on their work productivity.

| Variables regressed | r ² | F-value | Sig. | Interpretation |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|---------|-------|--------------------|
| Retaliation vs. Work productivity | 0.139 | 5.717 | 0.006 | Significant effect |
| Coefficients | Beta | t-value | Sig. | |
| (Constant) | 5.134 | 46.416 | 0.010 | Significant effect |
| Retaliation | -0.246 | -3.357 | 0.043 | Significant effect |

Whereas Bies et al. (1997) see an opportunity of change and growth in retaliatory employee reactions against any form of perceived aggression from the supervisors, the regression results in Table 1 suggest otherwise. The numerical results indicate that subordinates' retaliatory reactions significantly and negatively affect their work productivity. Since the *p*. value (0.006) is below the margin of error (0.05) which was the minimum level of probability required to declare statistical significance, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected while the alternate (H_1) was by default accepted. The *Beta* value (-0.246) suggests that, holding other variables at zero, a 1% increase in retaliatory reaction will be accompanied by a (-0.246) decrease in work productivity. While the *constant* value (5.134) with corresponding *t*. (46.416) and *sig.* (0.010) shows that work productivity can still be influenced significantly and positively by other factors, save for, employee retaliatory reactions.

It is important to note that the numerical data provided in Table 1 only helped to establish the impact of employee retaliatory reaction on their own work productivity, but did not aid the establishment of the circumstances under which subordinates resort to retaliation and how retaliation may be valuable or otherwise to an organization. The interview responses on the TI, in part, clarified this bit.

The data obtained from CEM1, CEODL2, CEODL4 & CEM3 on TI indicated that, whereas aggressive reciprocity where the victims of mistreatment return mistreatment has been extremely detrimental to organizations, for the case of KIU it has been a recipe for growth in some instances. For many years our supervisors assumed monopoly over chaos and injustice but

when we got fade up of their endless mistreatment and retaliated in the same amount, it was at that point that the long-lost sanity, peace, and stability were restored at the workplace. At the moment, we may not be so sure of the long-term impact of retaliation on this University, but what we are sure of is that, it has so far neutralized supervisors' arrogance.

Participants such as; CEM2, CEM4, & CEODL1 further observed that retaliation is a type of response demonstrated by the subordinates as a reciprocal form of frustration that counters any perceived form of injustice by the supervisor. They intimated that, "retaliation at KIU is a new development intended to suppress any form of unjustifiable injustice by the supervisors. Unlike before, subordinates are now one, fight together, and win together; it is this solidarity that has prevailed over the supervisors' impunity. At least there is peace for now; the University is stable and delivering on its core functions.

However, whereas subordinates have of late come together to fight for their rights, a handful choose not to engage in any form of retaliation for fear of the unknown. Participants (e.g., CEM5, CEODL3 & CEODL5) with great concern observed that, "the level of unemployment in Uganda has deprived employees the employment rights at the workplace; they choose to keep calm regardless of the myriad uncertainties and level of injustice leveled against them. They surrender their liberty for unreasonable recompenses just for the sake of seeing another day." They added.

Participants CEM5 & CEODL5 further observed that, "the impact of aggression on staff is detrimental, but what can we do? Most employers out there are unserious, it's better to stay with devil we know. What is hurting most is that, our supervisors do not see anything wrong with their supervisory style! It is frustrating."

Although the numerical data have clearly indicated that, retaliatory reactions do not significantly and positively affect work productivity, and that any unit increase in retaliatory reaction is accompanied by a decreased significant level of work productivity (Beta = -246; t-value = -3.357; & sig. 0.043 < 0.05), interview responses suggested otherwise. Retaliation has in some cases been a recipe for growth and stability.

4.2. The Effect of Supervisor-displaced Aggression on Subordinates' Work Productivity

To determine whether or not supervisor-displaced aggression affects subordinates' work productivity, a null hypothesis was tested for any possible connection between these two variables. Interview responses were triangulated with the numerical data for an all-inclusive reality on the ground.

Table 2. Simple linear regression analysis on the effect of supervisor-displaced aggression on subordinates' work productivity.

| Variables regressed | R^2 | F-value | Sig. | Interpretation |
|--|--------|---------|-------|--------------------|
| Displaced aggression vs. Work productivity | 0.189 | 11.646 | 0.032 | Significant effect |
| Coefficients | Beta | t-value | Sig. | |
| (Constant) | 3.068 | 30.231 | 0.000 | Significant effect |
| Displaced aggression | -0.118 | 1.874 | 0.041 | Significant effect |

The regression results in Table 2 indicate that, supervisor-displaced aggression significantly and negatively affect subordinates' work productivity at KIU; The Beta value (-0.118) presupposes that, holding other variables at zero, a unit increase in supervisor-displaced aggression will be accompanied by a (-0.118) decrease in subordinates' work productivity. However, the constant value (3.068) with corresponding *t*. (30.231) and sig. (0.000) shows that subordinates' work productivity can be significantly and positively affected, regardless of the supervisors' hostility.

However, the numerical data provided in Table 2, only show the probable impact displaced aggression had on employee work productivity but does not indicate the circumstances and conditions under which supervisors demonstrate displaced aggression to their supervisees. The study utilized interview responses from key informants (e.g., CEM1, CEM2, CEM3, CEM4, CEM5, and CEODL1, CEODL2, CEODL3, CEODL4, & CEODL5) to examine the conditions that trigger this kind of supervisory response.

Participants (e.g., CEM2, CEM3, CEM4, & CEODL1) on MF noted that displaced aggression occurs when the transgressor deliberately ignores the target and direct his/her anger to wrong person for fear of consequences. When this is done repeatedly, the victim out of annoyance or irritation explodes with anger due to pent up frustration.

Relatedly, participants CEM1, CEM5, CEODL2, CEODL3, CEODL4 & CEODL5 on MF further observed that in most cases their supervisors become ruthless and arrogant, for no justifiable reasons. For example, “our supervisors get offended whenever we are consulted by the Managing Director (MD) for guidance. They displace their frustration to us instead of the MD.”

In the same tone participants CEM1, CEODL4 & CEM5 further observed that, “some of our colleagues have been wrongly accused, terminated, demoted, among others by our supervisors with no justifiable cause, but just because the MD occasionally consults us instead of them. These unethical reactions breed hatred and instability in the University and are detrimental to staff productivity.” They added.

Participants such as CEM5, CEODL1, CEODL4, CEM1, and CEM2 further noted that, in cases where aggression is accompanied by a positive reinforcer such as bonuses, prompt monthly pay, staff development scheme and other forms of motivators to support individual growth, whatever the level of severity, aggression rarely hinders productivity.

On the same note, participant CEODL4 claims that, “if it weren’t for the staff development scheme through which I am yet to obtain my PhD, I would have left by now. But no matter the level of mistreatment and unfairness, I must persevere and graduate, else, I may have nothing good to remember about this place.” Sometimes it is hard to stand the level of injustice here at work.”

In as far as (H_0) 2 is concerned, it is evident that supervisor-displaced aggression significantly and negatively affects subordinates’ work productivity, and whenever applied, it attracts an inverse reaction in the predicted variable.

4.3. The Effect of Subordinates’ Psychological Withdrawal on Work Productivity

During the conceptual phase, the researcher hypothesized that; subordinates’ psychological withdrawal does not significantly affect the general work productivity of the University. An interview guide for interview responses to counter-check the validity of the numerical data was designed and duly served to the key informants. Results from those two sources are presented below.

Table 3. Simple linear regression analysis on the effect of subordinates’ psychological withdrawal on their work productivity.

| Variables regressed | r^2 | F-value | Sig. | Interpretation |
|--|--------|---------|-------|-----------------------|
| Psychological withdraw vs. Employee productivity | 0.172 | 0.675 | 0.194 | No significant effect |
| Coefficients | Beta | t-value | Sig. | |
| (Constant) | 5.481 | 46.142 | 0.004 | Significant effect |
| Psychological withdraw | -0.035 | -0.916 | 0.361 | No significant effect |

Table 3 presents numerical data from 93 respondents. Results show that subordinates’ psychological withdrawal, negatively affect employee work productivity and that of the University. The f . (0.675) and p . (0.194) values clearly support the view that employee “psychological withdrawal” is not a true predictor of positive-work productivity, rather a negative catalyst that only attracts negative results whenever resorted to by the employees. The $Beta$ value (-0.035) for example, suggests an inverse relationship that is; holding other factors constant, a 1% increase in employee psychological withdrawal would be accompanied by (-0.035) decrease in work productivity. However, the $constant$ value (5.481) with corresponding t . (46.142) and sig . (0.004) indicates that work productivity can still be significant and positive, irrespective of employee psychological withdrawal.

In addition, the 3rd null hypothesis (H_0) to the effect that employee psychological withdrawal does not significantly affect employee work productivity was accepted while the alternative (H_1) was rejected since the p . (0.194) value was higher than (0.05) which was the minimum level of significance required in this inquiry for statistical significance.

To establish the circumstances under which employees resort to psychological withdrawal at the workplace, the study obtained responses from the key informants through interviews. The interviewees (e.g., CEM1, CEM2, CEM3, CEM4, CEM5, and CEODL1, CEODL2, CEODL3, CEODL4, & CEODL5) responded as follows;

Respondents such as (CEM2, CEM4, CEODL1, & CEODL3) on MR indicated that due to perceived harsh consequences that may arise out of the supervisor-subordinate misunderstandings, subordinates have resorted to psychological withdrawal for fear of losing their jobs. They neither advise nor challenge the status quo.

Participants such as (CEM5, CEODL5, & CEODL2) MR further observed that “it’s wise to only mind about our salaries, rather than wasting time advising supervisors on matters which do not directly affect our work. Any simple advice from the senior staff is considered toxic and yet we genuinely advise them since some of them are junior irrespective of the administrative titles they carry.”

Relatedly, participant CEODL4 indicated that, “this is neither my first job nor the last”, why should I really bother? It’s a waste of time to over think about the mistreatment. It will come to pass with supervisors being chased, or me finding another job.

In a similar tone, participant CEM3 noted that, “withdrawing from any form of confrontation or unhealth argument is working for the University but it is temporary. We are peaceful at the moment, seem to be focused, although in actual sense we are heading for a disaster.”

Participant CEM1 observed that, “the psychological attachment a majority of people here have, to assume that this University is theirs/ours and should fight for its stability, is leading most of us into problems. We have on various occasions gotten out of our comfort to make things happen as desired, but the more we have done it, the more we have crashed. Its high time we gave up.”

Whereas staff withdrawal may be regarded as health for systems stability due to the absence of direct confrontations and chaos, it is not health for an ambitious institution like KIU whose success has been solely dependent upon the vibrancy of its staff. Creating an environment that denies them an opportunity to freely challenge the status quo for systemic stability and excellence is absolutely unwise. There is no higher institution of learning that can grow with freedom of speech being infringed upon.

In as far as (H₀) 3 is concerned, it is evident that “psychological withdrawal” does not significantly and positively affect subordinates’ work productivity, instead, it attracts a negative reaction on the level of productivity whenever staff choose to withdrawal.

4.4. The Overall Effect of Supervisor-Subordinate Aggression on Employee Work Productivity

Multiple linear regression analysis was adopted to measure the overall effect of supervisor-subordinate aggression on employee work productivity. It further granted the researcher the opportunity to determine the predictive power of each item of the independent variable. The following equations were adopted for analysis.

Functional Equations:

$$SSA = f(R, DA, PW) \quad (1)$$

From the above Equation 1, the mathematical equation was formulated as;

$$SSA = \beta_0 + \beta_1 R_1 + \beta_2 DA_2 + \beta_3 PW_3 + \mathcal{E} \quad (2)$$

Where:

β_0 = constant, or the level of confidence one is expected to have when all other factors are at zero.

$$\beta_0 + \beta_1 R_1 + \beta_2 DA_2 + \beta_3 PW_3$$

Refer to retaliation, displaced aggression, and psychological withdrawal. They are referred to as the predictors in this model.

$\beta_1, \beta_2, \text{ and } \beta_3$: Refer to the regression parameters, measuring the predictive strength the respective explanatory (independent) variables have on employee work productivity.

\mathcal{E} : Is the error term or functional estimation errors such as the excluded independent or predictor variables which are not part of this study.

Table 4. Multiple linear regression analysis on the effect of supervisor-subordinate aggression on their work productivity.

| Variables regressed | Adjusted r^2 | F-value | Sig. | Interpretation |
|----------------------------------|----------------|---------|-------|-----------------------|
| Aggression vs. Work productivity | 0.221 | 55.361 | 0.088 | No significant effect |
| Coefficients | Beta | t-value | Sig. | |
| (Constant) | 2.723 | 15.206 | 0.002 | Significant effect |
| Retaliation | -0.129 | -5.263 | 0.315 | No significant effect |
| Displaced aggression | 0.796 | 13.728 | 0.205 | No significant effect |
| Psychological withdrawal | 0.102 | 0.259 | 0.478 | No significant effect |

Table 4 shows that the *adjusted r^2* which is regarded as the best fit of determination is weak (22.1%). This implies that, the excluded variables from the model summary have more predictive power than the included independent variables. It is further revealed that the multiple linear regression model was insignificant ($f = 55.361$, $p = 0.088 > 0.05$) because the p . value was above the calculated probability (0.05) which was the minimum level of significance required in this study to declare a significant effect. This suggests that, all the three predictor variables put together, failed to attract a significant and positive variation in the dependent variable, instead, any unit increase in any of the parameters was accompanied by either an inverse or constant reaction in the predicted variable.

5. STUDY IMPLICATIONS

With reference to the numerical data, it is clearly established in this study that, a persistent increase in supervisors' aggression corresponds with a persistent decrease in employee work productivity. This may not sound as a new inroad in the world of discoveries, but it remains new to KIU in the sense that, aggressive leadership has been for many years regarded as appropriate and result-focused in KIU working environment which this study has disputed. In fact, aggression is associated with a negative reaction from employee productivity whenever it is applied, a reality which KIU supervisors seem unaware of at the moment. The temporary compliance and responsiveness to work which subordinates demonstrate whenever subjected to aggression, seem to have deluded KIU supervisors to assume that aggression is a pathway to work effectiveness and organizational success. Although this kind of reasoning is unforgivable, it should be remembered that this study was the first of its kind to investigate this matter in KIU working context, and a majority of supervisors at the time of the survey were not privy to any empirical investigation upon which their practice would hinge.

Again, delineating boundary conditions for theoretical relationships is critical for scientific progress and the development of effective practical interventions (Aguinis, 2004). This study extends the frontiers of knowledge by adding value to the emerging body of literature, justifying the circumstances under which subordinates get engaged in retaliatory and psychological withdrawal reactions, as well as supervisors' displaced aggression. Although there is relentless debate about the constituents of aggressive supervision, there is little disagreement that this field is sparsely researched. That being the case, this study is set out to extend knowledge and guide debate to the desired end.

In addition, several earlier studies never observed the fact that supervisors' aggressive response towards subordinates is in some instances heightened by the psychological attachment which supervisors usually have towards the organization. This suggests that, even though conditions do not warrant aggression, supervisors of this type unintentionally develop a cognitive-affective state towards the organization that usually leads them into

“territoriality”, a state that breeds aggression in the long run. At the time of this inquiry, this “pseud psychological ownership” was prominent at KIU as most aggressive supervisors were found to have had a close relationship with the MD. However, further investigations are deemed necessary in this context, for it is still a gray area and yet its impact looks significant in predicting aggressive reactions at the workplace.

This inquiry demands an immediate review of certain practices that are in the face of the contemporaries and pragmatists seem obsolete but regrettably glorified at KIU. Thinking that employees are desperate for work and no matter the working conditions are bound to stay, is a “fool’s errand”, outdated, and a potential recipe for calamity. Adopting aggressive and corrosive administrative tactics with the view of boosting productivity is unrealistic and is not good for the University. True, supervisor-aggressive reactions can command obedience among the vulnerable employees but cannot be relied on to rule senior staff. This partly explains why at the time of this inquiry; attrition rate was high among the senior staff as opposed to their counterparts. This is not healthy for the University, because the success of any organization lies greatly on the seniority of its workforce (Fred, 2021; Ssemugenyi, Seje, & Asumwa, 2020).

“In conflict, we excel” is a prominent narrative among the post classical management scientists; in an attempt to keep afloat, supervisors at KIU seem to have borrowed a leaf from this school of thought to manage it employees, although for no fault of themselves, got drained in this conflict management jargon. Getting inclined to this management philosophy is appropriate only when conflict is used as a positive catalyst to reinforce cohesion and organizational stability, but using it selectively with an intention of disenfranchising certain employees as the case was during this inquiry is a mirage.

Although one may claim that this study used data from a single source to test hypotheses, and that its generalizability may be questionable, it is important to remember that, the primary concern of this study was inclined to theoretical generalizability rather than the generalizability of the effect, and that the latter is only important when intending to generalize results to a particular population (Highhouse & Gillespie, 2009). The fact that, aggressive supervision is not well attended to in the scholarly sense at KIU, findings of this study may be used as a benchmark to guide practice in the same study context. Again, the evidence adduced in this study prompts readers to believe that many academics in universities similar to KIU work in environments which hold them back from engaging actively in academic business.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there is substantial research demonstrating the impact of aggressive reactions on employee work productivity in the business world, there is little scholarly evidence that the patterns of aggressive behaviors are well understood in an academic context (Kiyaga, 2015; Okotoni, 2002). That being the case, the researcher tested three null hypotheses to examine the effect of aggressive reactions on employee work productivity in an academic environment. To control bias, the numerical data were counter-checked for validity through triangulation where interview responses were used as control parameters. Results indicated that, all the three predictor variables of aggression put together, failed to attract a significant and positive variation in the dependent variable, and that, any unit increase in any of the parameters was accompanied by an inverse reaction in the predicted variable. This position was neither known nor imagined by KIU supervisors before this study. This novel inquiry can be regarded as an interdisciplinary bridge that is intended to foster connection of research to practice and practice to research.

Although aggression is regarded as a source of obedience and compliance at KIU, its real impact on the organizational effectiveness is actually overrated. The temporary compliance and reactive employee responses triggered by aggression seem to have denied supervisors the opportunity to appreciate the true impact of supervisors’ aggression on employee work productivity. This is justified by the continual use of arrogance by some supervisors even when reality on the ground depicts shrinkage in employee work productivity. Attempts to apply human-governance models that are premised on employee needs are urgently needed for smooth running.

Since it is a truism that the eminence of a university cannot outmatch that of its academic staff and that the survival of any institution lies in its ability to nurture, coach, and retain its workforce (Ssemugenyi et al., 2020) the University management is hereby advised to adopt governance models which restrain people in authority from misusing power and authority. A code of practice that incorporates professionalism, ethics and integrity is desirable for KIU to get prepared for the challenges ahead.

To save the University from decadence, this study recommends the adoption of a human relations model to synergize the working environment of subordinates with their supervisors. The human relations movement is seen as the precursor of the modern human resources function where the individual, group, and organizational goals are aligned together for a common cause. At the moment this is lacking at KIU, the organizational goals are not aligned along with employee needs and aspirations while the organizational psychology is in conflict with employee work culture. Burke (2017) is of the view that the creation of a psychologically healthy workplace rests squarely on the shoulders of the supervisors. Admittedly, time is up for some KIU supervisors to drop arrogance, indifference, and impunity for a healthy and competitive working environment that breeds team spirit, innovation, originality, imagination, and continuous improvement.

Measures against workplace aggression deserve utmost attention from all key stakeholders. Oversight institutions such as labor organizations, human rights agencies, National Council for Higher Education (NCHC) not only need to wait for aggrieved employees to litigate and/or wait for universities to run down the drain, rather, need to conduct periodic awareness on employee rights across universities. At the moment their presence (oversight institutions) in universities is not felt at all, a reason why supervisors continually demonstrate excessive force with impunity.

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