REDEFINING EMPLOYER-EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS FOR HIGH AND SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTIVITY IN NIGERIA

Adisa, A. L. (Ph.D)  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria.  
adisaademola2000@yahoo.com

&

Olasupo, M. O. (Ph.D)  
(Corresponding Author)  
Department of Psychology  
Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria.  
gbenga.olasupo@yahoo.com

Abstract
The low productivity in Nigeria is traceable to poor relations between employers and employees. Productivity level competes well with military might or political strength in determining worth/dignity of a nation. Besides, poor standard of living, unemployment, high crime and emigration rates, and underdevelopment, all which are markers of low productivity, are still very visible in Nigeria. The paper, purely non-empirical, traces the importance of meanings that those who are involved in production process (employers and employees) make out of their relationships and the influence on commitment and consequently, productivity. It stresses the need for a balanced consideration of negative perception, the one which will include relationship evaluation from the standpoint of the employers as well. Sociological theories such as symbolic interaction and exchange are considered relevant. The paper concludes that Nigeria still struggles with low level of productivity, which has no bearing with dearth of manpower/poor skills, but which arises from absence of trust, slavish treatment of workers, incessant conflicts, and poor orientation to work, arising from negative definitions of employers-employees’ relationships.

Key words: Counter-productive work behavior, employer-employee relationships, exchange theory, organizational commitment, productivity, symbolic interactionism.

Introduction
Evidence abound to show that many workplaces in Nigeria, both in the private and public sectors, feature workforce that low productivity characterizes. This is as a result of perceived and/or actual poor treatment by employers, resultant low morale, anger/dissatisfaction and manifestations of counterproductive work behaviour, presence of many trade associations, high frequency of strikes and other industrial actions, among others. Low productivity, therefore, is a second-order manifestation. If negative, employees’ self-perceptions lead to their engagement in counter-productive work behaviours and which consequently result in low productivity. Many workers define the relationships with their employers as that of a master to slave(s). This is because many of the workers are on low income; and beyond this, very few employers keep to other terms/contracts of employment in management of employees, even to the point of staff disengagement. Retrenchment exercises lead to lay-offs and which workers cannot/can hardly challenge in the courts of law. Observations have shown that workers seldom win such cases. While at work then, many employees may engage in counterproductive work behaviour that will open up some illegal ways for survival before or when they are to disengage from work.

While researchers commonly presented the foregoing as true and commonly expressed, this paper regards it as an unbalanced, one-sided argument. Scholars seem not to give attention to the fact that the unwelcome treatment from employer(s) may be a function of poor perception which employers also have of their employees. Inattention to this should account for the persistence of poor employers and employees relationships in Nigeria. As expressed, the unfocused reality is that the rich also complain/lament; and, if the employers’ complaints influence their actions, they will not have smooth relationships with employees. For
instance, an employer may always view workers as cheats, limited in potentials for high performance and hence, will not yield positively to motivation (McGregor’s theory X), envious, and inherently ungrateful. All these will not encourage employers to want to empower the employees. But, there is no losing sight of the fact that, most times, the poor treatments of workers may be traceable to self-love/greed of the employers. This is especially so if the apprehension that the empowerment of working class through better pay may reduce the population of the poor, loyal employees, as some of them may enjoy upward mobility in wealth stratification ladder. The capitalists will like to shield themselves because the larger their class becomes when some better-treated low or medium income employees join, the lower the population of the available working class. The lower the population of available working class, the enhanced is the status of the remaining workers, since the demand for them will exceed their supply/availability. This simple illustration by the law of demand and supply may perpetuate poor treatment of workers by the employers. Whatever is the case, absence of trust from either side has the potential to discourage high and sustained production/performance. The advocacy in this paper will be beneficial both to employers and their employees, if adopted.

It is also needful in this paper to show that stratification among workers calls for attention too. The employers may not even feature prominently once they have capable representatives as top-level managers. Redding (1985) stressed that when an organisation’s top-level management holds the belief that employees are self-interested and untrustworthy, they then act in ways that discourage upward communication. And, when an organisation discourages opportunity to voice out feelings, it leads to deterioration of organisational performance (Bagheri, Zarei and Aeen, 2012).

It then becomes apparent that the concept, employees, will not oftentimes refer to all workers both at the management and non-management levels. A kind of differential treatment favouring employees at the management level might have won the managers over to the side of the employers, thereby creating a sort of divide-and-rule situation among those who should be acting together. This probable display of differential group identities, which is capable of weakening employees’ bargaining powers, is yet to be given the attention it deserves as a determinant of a person’s productivity and capability (Kaushik, 2013). The question now is: Why the concern for national productivity level?

The joy of an individual citizen, who has access to information about his or her country, and is concerned about personal health, should also have concern for the country’s level of economic productivity, and which translates into national economic development. As an academic, reading unpleasant statistics about Nigeria pains me. It is, therefore, a true saying that the health of a nation determines greatly the health of the citizens and probably, vice versa. High productivity will reduce unemployment, crime rate, unnecessary emigration, and inflation. It will, therefore, improve standard of living and joy. The paper, with its contributions to knowledge, may not only stir attention to a rework of some theories as far as productivity of labour in Nigeria is concerned, it will improve labour relations as well. Employers and employees should give off their best.

**Literature Review**

Scholars such as Bertell (1971), Fleisher (1973) and Cohen (1978) reviewed Marx’s economic determinism, where he stated that the two principal issues in seeking to understand production processes among a people are: one, forces of production and two, relation of production. Marx, however, stressed that the latter is more important than the former. Forces of production encompass land and capital that an entrepreneur brings into production activities, while relations of production cover all the interactions among workers, and between workers and their employers. Submissions in this paper subscribe to Marx’s assertion because apart from the quantum of capital, land and raw materials, every other thing has its different measures of impact on productivity. The decision making process, organisational silence and voice, harmony or discord, motivation/demoralization, every cough, every sneeze, every absence of a worker, accident rate and many more relationship issues that may not receive employers’ or employees’ attention, affect production process and productivity level. Fleisher (1973) explains that economic determinism is the theory of history that holds that economic relations (such as being an owner or capitalist, or being a worker or proletariat), is the foundation on which all other social and political arrangements are built. In the Marxist version associated with Karl Marx, the emphasis is on the exploitation of the working class which leads to revolt and overthrow of capitalism. The exchange between the employers and the employees is of concern. Do they exchange trust, confidence, love, or opposite of all these in their relationships?

Even as many theories of interactionist orientation can capture relationships at work, discussions in this paper anchor on exchange theory and symbolic interactionism. This is because exchange theory has bearing with many orientations. It is related to economics- theory of rational choices, psychology- Ivan
Pavlov’s and Skinner’s works, and even anthropology- Malinowski’s study of the Trobriand Islanders. Perceptions and meanings attributed to relationships are also of important consideration; hence, the significance of symbolic interactionism too.

To Mead (1967) and Blumer (1986), humans live in a symbolic world of learned meanings. Symbols arise in the social process and are shared. Symbols also have motivational significance; meanings and symbols allow individuals to carry out distinctively human actions and interactions. An assumption of symbolic interactionism states that humans act towards objects/people according to the meanings such objects/give to the acting individuals. What meaning is given to the salary that is paid in exchange for service rendered by the employees? How do the employers read the exchange of service for salary they are paying the employees too? These are underlying issues behind the observable behaviour resulting in low/high productivity, industrial harmony/conflict and consequently, economic development.

Part of the motivation for this work is in the established findings that science itself supports that giving is beneficial. Research by Dunn and her colleagues (2008), and reported in the Journal of Science, showed that people’s sense of happiness is greater when they spend relatively more on others than on themselves. In the survey of over 600 US citizens, Dunn and her colleagues found that spending money on others predicted greater happiness whereas spending money on oneself did not. And, this pattern was found across all income levels. In other words, even those with little money reported greater happiness when their proportion of spending on others, relative to the self, was greater. In a more controlled experiment, Dunn and her colleagues gave students at the University of British Columbia an envelope containing money and told them that they either (1) had to spend the money on themselves before 5:00pm that day or (2), had to spend the money on someone else before the hour. Those who gifted for others were happier than those who gifted for themselves. At this juncture, one can ask whether this would hold for school children of all ages. In some cases, there were 5 dollars in the envelope and in other cases there were 20 dollars. The amount, notwithstanding, the results were the same. Spending on others made people happier than spending on oneself. Ironically however, when asked to predict which outcome would make one happier (spending on oneself or on other(s)), another group of students at the same university thought spending on themselves would make them happier than spending on others. But, when they actually had the opportunity to give to others than to themselves, it proved their selfish assumptions wrong.

In addition to scientific evidences, transcendental leaders express support for the benefits derivable from giving. Emphasizing the Buddhist Principle of Dependent Origination, the 14th Dalai Lama notes that one’s own happiness is dependent on the happiness of others. In his book, Ethics for the New Millennium (2001), he pointed out that happiness does not come from material things but rather from a deep and genuine concern for the happiness of others. Focusing on one’s own needs instead of others results in negative emotion that prevents true and lasting happiness for the self. Mahatma Gandhi, in one of his quoted submissions, once said this on self-understanding that: the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

The late Martin Luther King Jr. in his message to a congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, exactly two months before his assassination in 1963 said this as what should appear on his epitaph. He emphasized he would simply be remembered as a man who tried to help others, serve others, and give to others. He recognized that personal accolades such as winning Nobel prizes is inferior to living a life of service to others.

Many empirical reports have also established strong relationships between perception and performance/productivity. For instance, Masterson, Lewis, Goldman and Taylor (2000) reported in their study that one, interactional justice perceptions affected supervisor-related outcomes via the variable of leader exchange and two, procedural justice perceptions affected organisation-related outcomes via the mediating variable of perceived organisational support. Based on 274 correlations of self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control and emotional stability (core self-evaluation traits) with job satisfaction and job performance, they found the four traits to be the best dispositional predictors of job satisfaction and job performance (Judge and Bono, 2001). The meta-analytic procedures used to examine the relationships between individual level (psychological) climate perceptions and work outcomes such as employee attitudes, psychological well-being, motivation and performance, produced a result that psychological climate-generalized as individuals’ perceptions of their work environment, did have significant relationships with individuals’ work attitudes, motivation, and performance (Parker, Baltes, Young, Huff, Altmann, LaCost and Roberts, 2003).

The literature noted that Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB) describes all forms of behaviour by the employee(s), all which are against the interests and goals of the employing organisations. The behavior must be intentional and deriving from a wide range of underlying causes and motivations. The
behavior may range from: leaving workplace earlier than the closing hour, to go-slow, taking long breaks, sabotage, demanding kickbacks, favouratism, gossiping, harassment, verbal abuse, alcoholism and substance abuse, absenteeism, social loafing, cyber loafing, use of falsified ages and ghost workers, and theft. The effects these negative behaviors pose to performance/productivity are receiving adequate attention. And this is not only from some articles by interested scholars, employers also engage consultants to assess companies’ problems. There have also been establishments of reputable journals such as: Journal of Selection and Assessment, The Journal of Applied Psychology, Computers and Human Behaviour, Personality and Individual Differences, Occupational Health Psychology, Human Resource Management Reviews, Military Justice, Criminal Justice Ethics, European Journal of Work and Organisational Psychology and International Journal of Nursing Studies. The contributions of these journals, other books and reports not listed here, may prompt one to ask whether there is any other issue left to be discussed/known. In Nigeria’s case, there is still a lot of work to do, especially in the area of advocacy, to facilitate improved and sustained level of performance/productivity.

The work of Obadan and Odu sola (2000) made reference to the centrality of increased productivity in the brilliant performance of the Asian Tigers and Japan in the recent times (Simbeye, 1992; World Bank, 1993). They argued that countries with high productivity are not only central to the determination of global balance of power, for instance, Japan and Germany, but also serve as centres of stimulus, where world resources (including labour are re-directed to, as opposed to countries with low or declining productivity. Corroborating this, Roberts and Tybout (1997) and Rensburg and Naudé (1999), noted that productivity increases competitiveness in terms of penetrating the world market. Thus, high capacity utilization characterizes countries with high productivity (optimal use of resources), high standard of living, low rate of unemployment and social progress. In Nigeria, the opposites of all these indices hold.

Other works in the literature evaluated productivity as the relationship between the quantity and quality of services produced and the quantity of resources needed to produce them; that is, factor inputs such as labour, capital and technology (Simbeye, 1992; Okojie, 1995; Roberts and Tybouts, 1997). Mali (1978) defined productivity as: the measure of how resources are being brought together in organisations and utilized for accomplishing a set of results. It is the reaching of the height of performance with the least expenditure of resources.” In my own submission, productivity is better measured as the quantity and quality of goods produced at the level where economies of scale are optimally enjoyed, while not overlooking the time spent and the stress involved in the production process. Relevant questions to be posed are: How much good is produced? Is the produced item at its best quality state per that time? Is it produced at the minimum inputs level (comprising time and stress as well)? When these are taken care of, a better result will be obtained as far as productivity is concerned.

As earlier stated in this paper, low levels of performance/productivity by the Nigerian workers are not attributable, principally, to low skills, poor training, poor health or dearth of personnel; they should be linked to poor orientation to work, poor motivation, low morale, poor attitude, and the resultant exhibition of counterproductive work behaviour. In this paper, the contribution, therefore, is in the area of morale lifting and ways of achieving good interpersonal and intergroup relationships at workplaces for high productivity. The submission in this paper is, however, not to serve as opium to the oppressed workers/employees but to arouse a rethink among employees and employers alike on what it means to live, behave or work and avoid being slavish in such relationships.

Scholars with psychological orientation have also worked on human personality and feelings of self-worth. Rogers’ theory of therapy, personality and inter-personal relationships (1959), stressed that human “organism” has an underlying “actualizing tendency.” This aims to develop all capacities in ways that maintain or enhance the organism and move it toward autonomy. The tendency is directional, constructive and present in all things. The actualizing tendencies can be suppressed but can never be destroyed without the destruction of the organism (Rogers, 1977). Maddi (1996) described this as a biological pressure to fulfill the genetic blueprint, and each person has a fundamental mandate to fulfill potentials. Central to Rogers’ theory is the notion of self or self-concept having abiding respects for the dignity of persons and an interest in persons as subjects rather than objects. Covington (1998) also noted that the highest human priority is the search for self-acceptance (as opposed to alienation) and that one’s worth often comes to depend on the ability to achieve competitively. That is, there is a pervasive tendency to equate accomplishment with human value. Put simply, individuals are thought to be only as worthy as their achievements. Note: The words in brackets are mine.

The next logical question is that: What lessons are derivable from Covington’s and Rogers’ postulations? These postulations are not of limited application; that is, they apply to all, whether employers, employees or customers. It is, therefore, important to stress that, except both the employees and employers
choose to adopt positive disposition towards each other, negative reactions from either or both side(s) will not yield any positive results. In other words, if the employees are embarking on counterproductive work behaviour because of unfair treatment from their employers, their productivity/accomplishments at workplace will go down and this will translate into erosion of their own self-worth. If for selfish reasons or any cause, the employers too fail in the expected dual roles of building productivity and workers, it is an indication of low accomplishment since nothing remarkable will be generated from displeased employees. Conclusively, being selfish in the relationship is self-destructive or self-limiting to both sides. The energy dissipated to unionism and management’s records of man-hour losses will be avoided when expectations are met both by the employees and the employers.

The literature has also shown that many employers sometimes forget that their success is tied to how positively workers view their roles and their likelihood of being personally successful. Baer presented critical influences on employees’ morale, namely:

(i) Trust in the company and its leaders
(ii) Career development opportunities
(iii) A fair exchange of rewards for efforts
(iv) The degree to which employee is given authority and independence
(v) Environment that permits success – mbaer@bna.com

Morale can be the fuel that drives an organisation forward or that feeds the fires of employees’ discontent, poor performance, and absenteeism (Ewton, 2007). Ewton (ibid.) viewed morale as a double-edged sword. Low morale has a high price tag. Sanford of The Gallup Organisation (2002), estimated that there were 22 million actively engaged employees costing the American economy as much as $350 billion per year in lost productivity, including absenteeism, illness and other problems that result when employees are unhappy at work. The American largest employers estimated that unscheduled absenteeism cost their businesses more than $760,000 per year in direct payroll costs, and even more than lower productivity, lost revenue, and the effects of poor morale were considered.

The Karl Marx and Robert Blauner’s orientation to study and describe employers-employees relationships, especially on alienation, saddens the employees and does not boost their morale. But none of these scholars did say workers/employees have got no rights. To claim these rights was the only major concern, especially to karl Marx.

According to Scherrer and Greven (2001), workers’ rights are embedded in the core rights of freedom of association, collective bargaining and prohibition of forced labour, child labour and discrimination in employment. Workers deserve respect and safety from harm coming from their interactions with work and work environment. The articles 6, 7 and 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights include:

(i) The rights to work, and which is defined as the opportunity of everyone to gain their living by being freely chosen or accepted, preventing discrimination in the workplace and ensuring access for the disadvantaged and prohibiting forced labour and or child labour.

(ii) Article 7 contains the right of everyone to just and favourable working conditions, defined as fair wages with equal pay for equal work, sufficient to provide a decent living for workers and their dependants; safe working conditions, equal opportunity in the workplace, sufficient rest and leisure, limited working hours and regular paid holidays.

(iii) In Article 8 is contained, the right to form and join trade unions and protect the right to go on strike. It allows these rights to be restricted to certain category of workers such as armed forces, police, government administrators, and by extension, some countries restricted workers in areas classified as essential services (Nigeria) while other countries interpreted it in a manner consistent with their constitution.

This paper will stress here that Article 8 might not have been but for the difficulties of achieving total faithfulness in the observance of Articles 6 and 7. Other thinkers have also made quotable quotes which are relevant for the understanding of the theme of this paper. One of such is Martin Luther King Jr. “We must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered” (Martin Luther King Jr., year not cited at the source). The literature has also stressed the need that: workers are to be built and not to be broken down. They need to exude confidence and feelings of self-worth. This cannot be achieved by monetary motivation alone but by appeal to workers’ psyche as well. For instance, professional footballers and other sportsmen, who in the olden days’ perspective would be seen as slaves, are celebrated now. Even as they are traded as commodities, people still struggle to be so treated. They
are paid well and they enjoy a measure of respect and honour. Some are even richer than many private employers of their indigenous countries. Some other categories of workers and professionals in better transactions and deals but whose incomes are slavish will not be as satisfied as the sportsmen and women.

To slave owners, slaves were investments and commodities, not human beings. The demeaned value of slaves as humans was reflected in the United States’ Constitution of the slave trade era, beginning from 1670s to 1783 when slavery was abolished. At this period, slaves were counted as three-fifths of one person for purposes of determining apportionment of congressional representatives (Quadagno, 1999). The issue of commitment is to be considered next. When high productivity is achieved, it requires having a crop of committed workers to sustain.

Scholl (1981), presented in Schmidt Jr. Labour Research Center of the University of Rhode Island, gave three components of commitment as: (i) Identification with the organisation’s goals and missions, manifested in pride in and defence of the organisation. (ii) Long-term membership or intention to remain with the organisation. This is often termed loyalty (iii) High levels of extra role behaviour, that is, behaviour beyond required performance- often referred to as citizenship behaviour or pro-social behaviour. With all these, there is still need to distinguish between commitment to organisation (local orientation) and commitment to a profession (cosmopolitan orientation). Loyalty describes a situation where a relationship is maintained despite some degree of dissatisfaction with one’s benefits from that relationship and/or the existence of better opportunities. The desire to succeed explains high level of extra role. Personality or something in peoples’ disposition makes them to exhibit these patterns of behaviour.

Commitment describes a stabilizing force that acts to maintain behavioural direction when expectancy/equity conditions are not met or do not function. Scholl (1981) posited that there are at least four possible commitment mechanisms, namely: (i) investments (ii) reciprocity (iii) lack of alternatives and (iv) identification.

**Investments**: Based on Becker’s (1960) early arguments, a number of empirical investigations have attempted to verify the proposition that individual investments into a particular organisation act as a stabilizing or maintenance mechanism. Specifically, investments (termed “side bets”) by Becker are posited to decrease an individual’s propensity to leave the organisation. Investments can be thought of as contributions whereby a future gain from present participation is tied to continuance of membership (Kantor, 1968). In terms of inducements/contributions, there is a time lag in the exchange the individual makes a contribution today in expectation of future inducements. This is posited to tie the individual to the organisation, even when the individual becomes dissatisfied with aspects of the exchange. The concept of “paying dues” nicely captures this idea. Investments can also be viewed in terms of alternative opportunities forgone (Blau and Duncan, 1967).

**Reciprocity**: Gouldner (1960) described reciprocity as a generalized and probably universal norm. Specifically, the norm that (a) People should help those who have helped them (b) People should not harm those who have helped them. Reciprocity is opposite investments which go with expectation of future rewards. Reciprocity involves an individual’s enjoyment of a benefit, such as training, or an opportunity beyond his current ability, and would expect to repay it through future performance. The norm of reciprocity holds we would expect that the debt incurred through advance rewards would act to hold the individual into a particular system until the debt was repaid. Additionally, individuals are not expected to leave if doing so would cause harm to an employer who has helped them.

**Lack of Alternatives**: In the course of career, individuals develop job related skills and abilities, specific training acquired and which can only be used in organisation limits an employee. When an employee can also not think laterally out-of-the-box but only vertically and therefore, cannot see any viable alternative, s/he may not leave an organisation.

**Social Identity**: Friedman and Havighurst (1954) discovered work as a major source of status and identification for a large number of individuals. As an individual becomes embedded in a social identity, change would become difficult. Stevens, Beyer and Trice (1978) found that identification was one of a number of factors leading to decreased propensity to leave the organisation among federal managers. Thus it can be posited that if the alternative opportunity does not allow for maintenance of a particular social identity, we would expect that an individual’s commitment to that opportunity would be increased.

**Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

It is apparent that Nigeria is still under-utilizing her production capabilities. The high rate of unemployment and crime, poor emigration records and brain drain, industrial conflicts in the form of strikes and poor standard of living, are evidences of the capacity under-utilization.
For instance, scholars began to observe an increase in crime rate as an index of under-utilization as from 1980s. Oloruntimehin (2000) noted that, female criminality did not only increase in number, it has also become more serious and significant over the years. And with this record about females, criminality among male counterparts must have been more worrisome.

Mutual respect, harmony and commitment to achieve synergy in relationships will result in a positive change for both the employers and the employees. The other two conditions that will facilitate change are, namely: both the employers and the employees must be prepared to advance relationships from a state of apathy to empathy/sympathy. They must swing into action to achieve satisfaction over productivity level. Since an economically powerful state is said to be a politically powerful one as well, increased productivity will, therefore, enhance the status of Nigeria in the comity of nations. Poor relationships will continually generate low productivity. The employers and the employees have to endear themselves into the hearts of each other, so much so, that they consider each other irreplaceable. Ben Carson, the Detroit-born neurosurgeon recipient of the highest Civilian Award in 2008 by President Gorge W. Bush, once said: “Happiness does not result from what we get but from what we give.” By the time both the employers and the employees are ready to promote each other by giving their best to their relationships, satisfaction over increased and sustained productivity will be great. Pursuits of selfish ends will always lower productivity. This paper ends on Winston Churchill’s words, that: We can only make a living by what we get, but a life by what we give. - Goodread/230 Quotes about Giving.

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