

When Educational Attainment and Work Experience Means Nothing to Ethical Behavior: An Analysis of the Nigerian Workplace

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of educational attainment and work experience on ethical behavior among Nigerian employees with a focus on identifying both individual and combined influences. Using a sample of 2,623 Nigerian employees, the study examines whether higher levels of education and greater work experience correlate with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the findings reveal that higher levels of education and greater work experience, when considered independently, do not significantly reduce unethical tendencies. However, a significant interaction effect emerges, indicating that individuals with both higher education and substantial work experience exhibit stronger ethical standards. This suggests that a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience is crucial in fostering ethical decision-making. The study underscores the importance of integrating ethics training into organizational development programs to cultivate a culture of ethical conduct.

Keywords: Ethical behavior, Educational attainment, Work experience, Nigerian Workplaces, Interaction Effect.

1. Introduction

Ethical behavior in the workplace is essential for fostering trust, ensuring transparency, and promoting a healthy organizational culture. When employees adhere to ethical principles, organizations are better positioned to achieve long-term success and maintain a positive reputation. Conversely, unethical practices, such as dishonesty, corruption, and exploitation, can lead to a breakdown of trust, reduced productivity, and financial losses (Trevino & Nelson, 2016). Within the Nigerian context, workplace ethics are of particular concern due to the prevalence of socio-economic challenges and limited regulatory oversight in some industries, which may create environments susceptible to unethical behavior (Akanbi & Ofoegbu, 2013).

Educational attainment and work experience are two critical factors that may influence employees' ethical decision-making in the workplace. Education often provides individuals with the moral reasoning skills necessary to distinguish between right and wrong, equipping them with a framework for ethical conduct (Rest & Narvaez, 2014). Studies suggest that individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit

stronger ethical behavior, potentially due to the values and critical thinking skills they acquire through formal education (Sims, 2019). Similarly, work experience can shape ethical behavior, as employees with extensive experience are more likely to understand the consequences of unethical actions on organizational outcomes and their careers (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

However, it is important to mention that while educational attainment and work experience are pivotal, it is essential to consider that ethical behavior can also be influenced by organizational culture and leadership styles, which may sometimes overshadow individual qualifications and experiences (Tabiu, 2023).

In Nigeria, workplace ethics is an area of growing concern as organizations grapple with issues such as corruption, favoritism, and mismanagement (Akanbi & Ofoegbu, 2013). Despite the critical importance of ethical behavior, there is limited research examining the factors that contribute to ethical or unethical conduct among Nigerian employees. Educational attainment and work experience are often presumed to influence workplace ethics, yet there is limited empirical evidence regarding their specific impact in the Nigerian context. As such, this study aims to address this gap by investigating how educational attainment and work experience influence ethical behavior among Nigerian employees. Specifically, the study examines the relationship between educational attainment and ethical behavior among Nigerian employees; analyzes the impact of work experience on ethical behavior among Nigerian employees; and investigates whether educational attainment and work experience jointly influence ethical behavior in the Nigerian workplace.

This study is significant because it addresses the growing concern about unethical practices within Nigerian organizations. By examining the role of educational attainment and work experience in shaping ethical behavior, this research provides insights that could be valuable for policymakers, educators, and employers in developing strategies to enhance workplace ethics. Understanding these influences is particularly crucial in a country where socioeconomic challenges can

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sometimes undermine ethical standards. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on workplace ethics in Nigeria and highlights the importance of fostering an ethical workforce through education and professional development.

2. Literature Review

A. Theoretical Background

The study of ethical behavior in the workplace has been widely explored through various theoretical frameworks. Key theories relevant to this study include Moral Development Theory and Social Learning Theory, both of which provide insights into how ethical behavior is learned and influenced by individual factors such as education and experience.

Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1981) posits that individuals progress through different stages of moral reasoning, which influence their ethical decision-making. According to this theory, individuals with higher levels of moral reasoning are less likely to engage in unethical behavior. Educational attainment can play a critical role in advancing moral development, as individuals exposed to diverse viewpoints and ethical dilemmas through education may develop higher moral reasoning skills (Rest & Narvaez, 2014). This theory suggests that more educated individuals may demonstrate stronger ethical standards due to enhanced moral reasoning abilities.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) explains that ethical behavior is often learned through observation and imitation. In the workplace, employees with greater work experience may have observed and internalized ethical practices or standards set by others. This theory supports the view that experienced employees are likely to develop stronger ethical behavior as they have had more time to learn from their environment, including mentors, peers, and organizational culture. Social Learning Theory is particularly relevant in explaining how workplace exposure and interactions can shape an employee's ethical values and actions.

B. Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes ethical behavior as a dependent variable influenced by two main independent variables: educational attainment and work experience. Ethical behavior in this context refers to employees' adherence to moral and professional standards, reflecting honesty, fairness, and integrity in their workplace conduct.

Educational Attainment is defined as the highest level of formal education completed. Educational attainment is posited to influence ethical behavior through exposure to ethical frameworks, critical thinking, and moral development (Rest & Narvaez, 2014). Higher education levels may promote ethical awareness and discourage unethical practices, as suggested by Moral Development Theory. Work Experience measures the number of years an employee has spent in the workforce. Work experience is expected to influence ethical behavior based on Social Learning Theory, as employees may develop ethical standards by observing and imitating the conduct of their colleagues and supervisors (Bandura, 1977). Experienced

employees may also be more aware of the long-term consequences of unethical behavior on organizational success and personal reputation.

This conceptual framework aims to investigate the individual effects of educational attainment and work experience, as well as any interaction effect between these two variables on employees' ethical behavior. Understanding these relationships can inform organizational policies to enhance workplace ethics.

C. Empirical Review

Several studies have explored the link between educational attainment and ethical behavior. Sims (2019) found that higher education levels correlated with stronger ethical standards among corporate professionals. This relationship is attributed to the exposure of educated individuals to ethical theories and critical thinking skills, which help them better understand the implications of their actions on others and the organization. Similarly, Rest and Narvaez (2014) observed that higher educational attainment is associated with advanced stages of moral reasoning, as education often exposes individuals to diverse ethical perspectives and dilemmas, encouraging a more thoughtful approach to decision-making. In addition, employees with advanced degrees tend to exhibit more ethical behaviors, particularly in public service roles (Adekanmbi & Ukpere, 2022).

However, some studies suggest that the relationship between education and ethics may not be straightforward. Jones (2020) found that while higher education can enhance ethical awareness, it does not necessarily translate to ethical behavior in all cases. Factors such as organizational culture and personal values also play significant roles. In the Nigerian context, where corruption and unethical practices may be more prevalent in some sectors, the influence of education on ethical behavior may be moderated by the specific workplace environment (Akanbi & Ofoegbu, 2013).

Research on work experience and ethical behavior suggests that employees with greater work experience are more likely to demonstrate ethical conduct. Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006) argue that experienced employees are less inclined to engage in unethical actions because they understand the long-term consequences of such behavior. Additionally, Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory suggests that employees learn ethical standards through observation and interaction over time, indicating that longer work experience allows individuals to internalize these standards.

In a study focusing on Nigerian organizations, Ogunyemi (2016) found that work experience had a positive impact on ethical behavior, as experienced employees were more aware of the ethical codes and consequences of non-compliance within their organizations. This study aligns with other research showing that experienced employees may feel a greater sense of responsibility toward maintaining ethical standards. However, Okpara and Wynn (2018) observed that work experience alone may not guarantee ethical behavior, especially in organizations with weak ethical cultures, suggesting that the workplace environment plays a significant role in shaping ethical conduct.

Recent empirical studies have begun examining how educational attainment and work experience interact to influence ethical behavior. Jones (2020) found that individuals with both high educational qualifications and extensive experience demonstrated lower tendencies toward unethical behavior compared to those with only one of these attributes. This interaction suggests that education and experience can mutually reinforce each other, where education provides a theoretical understanding of ethics, and experience provides practical applications.

In a study focused on ethical decision-making in complex environments, Sims and Brinkmann (2017) observed that employees with high educational backgrounds and considerable experience were better at navigating ethical challenges, as they could apply their theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios. This aligns with Treviño and Nelson's (2016) argument that ethical behavior is influenced by both intellectual and experiential components, where experience helps employees refine their ethical principles learned through formal education.

In Nigeria, where workplace ethics can be influenced by socio-economic factors, limited studies have directly addressed the interaction effect of education and experience. However, research such as Akanbi and Ofoegbu (2013) suggests that the ethical behavior of employees may be context-dependent, influenced not only by individual attributes but also by organizational and societal factors. While Tabiu (2023) highlighted the role of ethical leadership and organizational climate in promoting ethical behavior, there remains a gap in examining how personal factors like education and experience combine to impact ethics.

The interaction effect of educational attainment and work experience on ethical behavior highlights the complex nature of ethical decision-making in organizational settings. Studies suggest that individuals with both advanced education and extensive experience may be better prepared to make ethical decisions, as they can draw upon both theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom. However, there is a paucity of research in the Nigerian context that specifically examines this interaction. Given the unique socio-economic and organizational challenges in Nigeria, further studies could provide insights into how education and experience interact under different organizational cultures to promote or hinder ethical behavior.

This review underscores the need for research that considers not only the individual effects of education and experience but also their combined influence in shaping ethical conduct, particularly in contexts like Nigeria, where ethical challenges are prevalent. Consequently, the following three hypotheses were proposed by the study:

Hypothesis 1: Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Greater work experience is associated with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior.

Hypothesis 3: Educational attainment and work experience interact to influence ethical behavior, with experienced and highly educated employees demonstrating stronger ethical standards.

By addressing these gaps, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how education and experience jointly influence ethical behavior in Nigerian workplaces. This research can contribute valuable insights for policymakers and organizational leaders seeking to improve ethical standards in Nigeria's corporate environment.

3. Methodology

Data was sourced from a secondary dataset that captured responses from 2,623 Nigerian employees on variables such as unethical behavior, educational status, and work experience. Secondary data analysis is advantageous for this study as it enables the efficient exploration of a large sample, yielding robust insights from existing data (Johnston, 2017). The dataset aligns well with the study's objectives by covering key demographic and ethical metrics, facilitating an in-depth examination of the proposed hypotheses. This study measures three primary variables: ethical behavior (the dependent variable), and educational attainment and work experience (the independent variable). Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression were used to analyze the data, providing an overview of relationships between these variables and testing both individual and combined effects on ethical behavior (Field, 2013; Hair et al., 2019; Pallant, 2020).

A quantitative, correlational research design was employed to examine the relationships between educational attainment, work experience, and ethical behavior. This design is suitable for identifying naturally occurring variations in these variables without manipulation, allowing for a detailed analysis of how educational and experiential factors might influence ethical conduct in the workplace (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, the correlational design permits the study of potential interactions between educational attainment and work experience, which is essential for understanding if and how these factors jointly affect ethical behavior. By using quantitative methods, the study provides a precise quantification of the strength and direction of these relationships, offering clear insights into factors that predict ethical behavior (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

Since this study uses secondary data, efforts were made to ensure that the data source adheres to ethical guidelines, including confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent of participants during the original data collection (Babbie, 2020). Data was handled with integrity and transparency, ensuring that all findings accurately represent the participants' responses. Furthermore, any identifiers were removed or anonymized to protect participant privacy, aligning with the ethical standards outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020).

4. Results

A. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the primary variables—Educational Status, Work Experience, and Measures of Unethical Behavior.

The sample reflects moderate levels of both educational

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for all variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Educational Status	2,612	2.59	0.92	1	5
Work Experience	2,452	2.60	0.97	1	5
Measures of Unethical Behavior	2,622	70.73	9.25	9	100

Table 2

Predictor Variable	B	Standard Error	Beta (β)	t	p-value
Constant	70.07	0.69	—	101.66	< 0.001
Educational Status	0.42	0.21	0.041	2.00	0.046

Table 3

Predictor Variable	B	Standard Error	Beta (β)	t	p-value
Constant	70.07	0.69	—	101.66	< 0.001
Work Experience	-0.14	0.19	-0.015	-0.74	0.462

Table 4

Predictor Variable	B	Standard Error	Beta (β)	t	p-value
Constant	70.07	0.69	—	101.66	< 0.001
Educational Status	0.42	0.21	0.041	2.00	0.046
Work Experience	-0.14	0.19	-0.015	-0.74	0.462
Educational Status \times Work Experience	-0.75	0.28	-0.08	-2.68	0.007

Table 5

Hypothesis	Supported?
H1 Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior.	No
H2 Greater work experience is associated with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior.	No
H3 Educational attainment and work experience interact to influence ethical behavior, with experienced and highly educated employees demonstrating stronger ethical standards.	Yes

attainment ($M = 2.59$) and work experience ($M = 2.60$). The average score on unethical behavior (70.73) suggests a mid-range tendency toward unethical behavior among respondents, with substantial variability.

B. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior.

To test this hypothesis, a regression analysis was conducted with Educational Status as an independent variable and Measures of Unethical Behavior as the dependent variable.

The regression results show that Educational Status has a positive coefficient ($B = 0.42$, $p = 0.046$), which is statistically significant but contrary to the hypothesis. This suggests that higher educational attainment does not significantly lower tendencies toward unethical behavior; rather, there is a slight positive relationship.

Hypothesis 2: Greater work experience is associated with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior.

A regression analysis was also conducted to test the relationship between Work Experience and Measures of Unethical Behavior.

The coefficient for Work Experience is negative ($B = -0.14$) but not statistically significant ($p = 0.462$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is not supported; greater work experience does not significantly correlate with a reduced tendency toward unethical behavior in this sample.

H3: Educational attainment and work experience interact to influence ethical behavior, with experienced and highly educated employees demonstrating stronger ethical standards.

To test the interaction effect, an interaction term was created between Educational Status and Work Experience. A regression model was then run with Educational Status, Work Experience,

and the interaction term as predictors of Measures of Unethical Behavior.

The interaction term (Educational Status \times Work Experience) has a significant negative coefficient ($B = -0.75$, $p = 0.007$), indicating that educational attainment and work experience jointly influence unethical behavior. This supports Hypothesis 3; employees with higher education and greater work experience show a lower tendency toward unethical behavior, suggesting that these two factors combined reinforce ethical behavior.

C. Summary of Hypotheses Testing

These results indicate that, individually, neither educational attainment nor work experience alone significantly decreases unethical tendencies. However, when combined, they show a significant interaction effect, suggesting that employees with both higher educational attainment and greater experience are more likely to exhibit ethical behavior. This finding provides valuable insights for Nigerian organizations aiming to foster ethical standards in the workplace.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the impact of educational attainment and work experience on unethical behavior among Nigerian employees, with a focus on whether these factors individually or jointly influence ethical conduct in the workplace. The findings indicate a complex relationship between these factors, revealing insights relevant to understanding workplace ethics in the Nigerian context.

The first hypothesis posited that higher levels of educational attainment would be associated with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior. Contrary to this expectation, the results showed a slight positive association between educational

attainment and unethical behavior, though this relationship was statistically significant ($B = 0.42$, $p = 0.046$). These findings challenge previous studies, which have generally suggested that education fosters moral reasoning and ethical awareness (Rest & Narvaez, 2014; Sims, 2019). According to Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1981), higher levels of education are expected to enhance moral reasoning, providing individuals with better tools to navigate ethical dilemmas.

One possible explanation for the unexpected positive relationship could be the socio-economic context in Nigeria, where higher education does not necessarily equate to greater moral development or ethical standards due to systemic issues such as corruption and socio-economic pressures (Akanbi & Ofoegbu, 2013). In certain sectors, employees may face ethical compromises as they navigate challenging work environments, which may dilute the positive impact of education on ethical behavior. This finding suggests that while education may provide a theoretical framework for ethical behavior, external factors such as workplace culture and societal norms may also play crucial roles in shaping actual behavior.

The second hypothesis proposed that greater work experience would be associated with lower tendencies toward unethical behavior. However, the results showed no significant association between work experience and unethical behavior ($B = -0.14$, $p = 0.462$), contradicting Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which posits that individuals learn ethical behaviors through observation and repeated exposure to ethical practices. Studies have shown that work experience often enhances employees' understanding of workplace norms, leading to greater adherence to ethical standards (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

This inconsistency could stem from the possibility that ethical standards in Nigerian workplaces vary significantly across organizations. If ethical behavior is not consistently reinforced in the workplace, employees may not necessarily develop stronger ethical standards with experience. In organizations with limited ethical guidance or a lack of ethical role models, employees may be less likely to internalize ethical standards despite their work experience (Okpara & Wynn, 2018). These findings highlight the importance of a supportive ethical culture, suggesting that experience alone is insufficient in fostering ethical behavior without positive reinforcement from the work environment.

The third hypothesis proposed an interaction effect between educational attainment and work experience, suggesting that individuals who are both highly educated and experienced would demonstrate stronger ethical standards. The results supported this hypothesis, showing a significant negative interaction effect on unethical behavior ($B = -0.75$, $p = 0.007$). This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that ethical behavior is likely enhanced when employees have both the theoretical foundation provided by education and the practical experience to navigate complex workplace situations (Rest & Narvaez, 2014).

This interaction suggests that work experience may amplify the ethical standards gained through education by providing real-world applications and ethical challenges where learned

principles can be applied. Employees with higher education and greater experience are likely better equipped to handle ethical dilemmas due to their ability to critically assess situations and anticipate the long-term consequences of unethical actions (Sims, 2019). This reinforces the idea that a combination of both education and experience is beneficial in fostering ethical behavior, particularly in environments where employees are often faced with challenging decisions.

6. Implications of the Findings

These findings have practical implications for Nigerian organizations aiming to improve ethical standards in the workplace. First, they highlight the importance of combining educational initiatives with practical experience to strengthen ethical conduct. Organizations could consider implementing training programs that not only provide ethical guidelines but also encourage employees to apply ethical principles in real-world scenarios. Additionally, given that experience alone does not guarantee ethical behavior, fostering a positive ethical culture becomes crucial. By promoting an ethical organizational culture, leaders can create an environment where ethical behavior is observed, valued, and reinforced (Treviño & Nelson, 2016).

7. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, there are limitations worth noting. First, the reliance on self-reported measures of unethical behavior may introduce bias, as employees may underreport unethical actions. Future studies could use multi-source data, including supervisor or peer evaluations, to gain a more objective measure of ethical behavior. Furthermore, this study focused on Nigerian employees, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Future research could explore similar interactions between education and experience on ethical behavior in other regions to provide comparative insights.

Additionally, while the study demonstrated the interaction between education and experience, it did not account for organizational factors such as ethical climate and leadership style, which may influence how employees apply their education and experience in ethical decision-making (Akanbi & Ofoegbu, 2013). Future studies could examine the impact of these organizational variables to gain a more comprehensive understanding of factors that contribute to ethical behavior in the workplace.

8. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of educational attainment and work experience on unethical behavior among Nigerian employees, focusing on whether these factors individually or in combination influence ethical conduct in the workplace. Contrary to initial expectations, higher educational attainment alone did not significantly reduce unethical behavior; instead, it showed a slight positive association, suggesting that educational level may not always translate to ethical conduct in the workplace. Similarly, work experience alone was not

significantly associated with ethical behavior, challenging assumptions based on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which posits that experience fosters ethical behavior through observation and reinforcement.

However, a significant interaction effect was found between educational attainment and work experience, supporting the idea that the combination of higher education and greater experience strengthens ethical behavior. Employees who are both well-educated and experienced are likely to demonstrate more ethical conduct, possibly because they possess both the moral framework provided by education and the practical skills developed through experience to navigate ethical dilemmas.

These findings highlight the need for Nigerian organizations to foster a workplace culture that combines educational initiatives with experiential learning opportunities to enhance ethical standards. Organizations could benefit from implementing ethics training that provides real-world scenarios, allowing employees to apply learned principles in practice. Additionally, the findings suggest that merely relying on educational attainment or experience may be insufficient in fostering ethical behavior if not reinforced by a supportive ethical culture.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of workplace ethics in Nigeria, offering insights that can inform organizational policies and strategies for cultivating ethical behavior. Future research could explore additional factors, such as organizational culture and leadership style, to gain a more holistic view of what drives ethical behavior in diverse workplace settings.

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