

## **Victimization of Academic Staff in Selected South-South Universities in Nigeria: An Ethical Overview**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines and brings to limelight the victimization and antagonism of academic staff in South-South Universities and also proffers solutions to the situation. Eight randomly selected universities were used for this study. They comprised of 4 Federal Universities; University of Benin, University of Port Harcourt, University of Calabar and University of Uyo. As well as 4 state universities; Delta State University, Ambrose Alli University, Rivers State University of Science and Technology and Cross Rivers University of Technology. The application of the Taro Yamen formula gave the researcher 381 lecturers as the sample size out of the 8,180 lecturers of the 8 randomly selected universities that found the population and 174 Appointment and Promotion Committee (A&PC) members out of the 307 members that constitute the A&PC of the 8 randomly selected south-south universities. The A&PC members were interviewed to get a balanced view. Victimization of academic staff in South-South Universities in an on-going occurrence. The theoretical basis for this work are the Justice Ethical Theory and the Labeling Theory. This study highlights the causes of victimization in South-South universities and recommends that prompt attention should be given to resolving disagreements and face-offs between management and staff and also between employees, raising a standing reconciliation/grievance handling committee in all universities, keeping communication lines open to all staff, setting reasonable standards of conduct for oneself among others.*

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### **Introduction**

The workplace has always held a potential for mistreatment. But many can remember a time when there seemed to be more goodwill among colleagues. Organized victimization and harassment rarely developed. But over the years, there has been a generally diminishing spirit of solidarity, team spirit and healthy working relationships. People now have fewer scruples about engaging one another in open combat at work. Thus, concerned employees are worried with how to fit in at the work place and how can peace be pursued in our universities vis a vis its remedies. Awake, May 8, 2004 issue stressed that there is much victimization in work places that the work place has become a war zone, and one has to be combat ready.

Victimization in the work place involves frequent, repeated and systematic harassment. It might also include sarcasm, criticism, teasing and practical jokes, and a campaign of psychological terror. It also includes singling out for oppressive treatment; to antagonize and to cheat. The tactics of victimization ranges on a continuum from verbal abuse to termination of appointments. The target is also sometimes subjected to character assassination, verbal abuse, aggressive behaviour and cold shoulder treatment. Some victims are deliberately over worked and are

sometimes singled out to do the most unpleasant tasks that no one else wants to perform. Colleagues may sabotage the victimized person's efforts to work productively, perhaps by withholding information (Awake, May 8, 2004).

Awake, May 8, 2004 issue, again pointed out that most victims of harassment are targeted by one person, usually a senior or management staff. Indeed, any one in any occupation is a potential target for victimization. In some cases, the victim is subjected to the assault of an alliance of colleagues. This is mobbing, since it implies that a group of persons are putting an individual under pressure by deliberately annoying or attacking him or her. Perhaps most astonishing is the fact that in many cases, harassment is done by the Boss or with the Boss's consent. In some European studies, the immediate boss played an active role in about 50 percent of the cases, and quite often he or she proved to be the sole perpetrator. The goal in most cases of victimization in the work place is to make the victim an outcast. Death threat letters are also sometimes sent to the victim. Victims would have to endure a wide range of painful emotions – anger, guilt, shame, confusion, along with the feeling of worthlessness.

Studies have proven that a lot of victimization exists in the academia but much attention has not been devoted to it. Lecturers are being harassed, victimized, and antagonized by the management of universities and Vice Chancellors which has not been brought to limelight. All academic staff in the federal and state universities in Nigeria supposedly belong to a union called the academic staff union of universities (ASUU).

The co-existence between the governments, the management of universities and ASUU has not been cordial. Governments (Federal and State) have continued to ignore agreements it enters into with ASUU. ASUU activists and some staff constructively criticize the policies of the government and also the policies of the university's where they work. This has made their relationship frosty, and has led to face-offs, disagreements and strikes between government, ASUU and the management of universities (Anele 2011).

Ahiauzu and Adoki (1986) pointed out the Nigerian manager does not tolerate opposition in the work place. Management believes the employee should show allegiance to them and not to their union.

Government and the management of universities respond by antagonizing and victimizing ASUU activists. Government alone are not guilty of the harassment, victimization and termination of lecturers appointments (Anele 2011). Some Vice Chancellors stop salaries, deny lecturers their promotion, and sack ASUU members in connivance with the governing Councils. Anele (2011), went on to stress that apart from Government,

*“Vice Chancellors also victimize and antagonize their staff. They hurriedly implement government anti-ASUU policies and decisions such as immediate stoppage of salaries, non-payment of salaries, signing of attendance registers to consolidate their positions, termination of appointments of union Exco members, refusal to award them degrees (where some academics are involved in higher degree programmes in universities) and manipulation of promotion of lecturers among others” ... Pp64.*

Anikpo (2011) stressed that there are some Vice Chancellors who cook up charges to stifle the promotion of staff and terminate the appointments of ASUU activists and staff who criticize their policies. Vice Chancellors hand pick members of their investigation and disciplinary committees which most of the time are their strong loyalists and they use these committees to victimize staff. The investigation and disciplinary committees in south-south universities most of the time act already written scripts. An employee is found guilty even before the trial commences. It is most of the time, a witch hunting exercise. Vice Chancellors subject their perceived enemies and the perceived enemies of their 'kitchen cabinet' to more than three trials for the same offence just to get a guilty verdict. Some head of departments and senior teaching staff do not feel comfortable employing and retaining lecturers with a first class degree or retaining staff who have more degrees than themselves and would do everything possible to get that staff's appointment terminated because they feel threatened.

Emezue (2009) in Anele (2011) remarked that:

*"Some university senates have become an extension of the Vice Chancellor whims and caprices. The result is a senate acquiesces to every opinion of the Vice Chancellor whether good or bad. Minions are promoted and offered senate positions while hard working and responsible academics are relegated to the background" ... Pp63.*

Experience has shown that the Vice Chancellor has more powers and influences the Governing Council greatly. The Vice Chancellor as the chief Executive officer of the university controls the funds of the university which includes internal generated revenue, subventions and grants from Governments and other institutions. We find Governing Council members begging for contracts and executing same, and as a result some of them become 'toothless bulldogs'. Vice Chancellors employ the children and relatives of Governing Council members as well as the children and relations of members of his 'kitchen cabinet' and as a result they watch helplessly as the Vice Chancellors victimize and antagonize staff since they have compromised themselves. The vice chancellors victimize, antagonize and sack staff at will under the watchful eyes of the Governing Council and the Academic staff union which appears helpless (Tantua, 2015).

Employees are also sacked based on anonymous petitions which are sometimes sponsored by the management of the universities and sometimes written by our own colleagues which are most of the time anonymous and which is against public service rules. Deans of faculties are elected and not appointed. But some Vice Chancellors deny some qualified Professors the chance to be Deans, by subjecting them to popularity tests just to victimize them. This paves the way for the Vice Chancellor to appoint his ally as a Dean on acting capacity. Even when there is only one qualified candidate, that candidate is made to stand for election without any opponent and failure results are announced, instead of announcing the candidate as unopposed.

Head of departments are not elected but appointed by Vice Chancellors and therefore some of them serve as stooges to Vice Chancellors. Heads of departments in agreement with Vice Chancellors hand pick external examiners to remark scripts. Some Vice Chancellors in connivance with some head of departments influence the external examiners who might want adjunctship to get negative reports about their perceived enemies to victimize him/her. Tantua

(2015) pointed out that some Vice Chancellors level of antagonism and victimization has led to the death of some staff due to high blood pressure.

The National Scholar of April (2005) pointed out that by “1987, every radical lecturer had been penciled down for hounding, serious harassment, imprisonment, exile or assassination ...” Dr. Patrick Wilmot and Dr. Bala Usman of Ahmadu Bello University had their appointments terminated in 1986 and 1989 respectively for engaging actively in ASUU activities and criticizing the policies of the Government. Also in 1987, Dr. Festus Iyayi, the then president of ASUU and Dr. Peter Agbonifoh, both of the University of Benin, and who were executive members of ASUU had their appointments terminated because they opposed the imposition of Prof. Grace Alele Williams as the Vice Chancellor and also opposed her policies. A follow up was the making of the check-off dues voluntary by the Babangida Administration to make the union weaker.

Also in 1996, the ASUU president Dr. Assisi Asobie was also dismissed from service as a result of actions by ASUU (Ezike, 2011). The recent happenings in Rivers State University of Science and Technology where the researcher is a lecturer is of interest. The Governor of the state who is the visitor of the university brought and imposed a Vice Chancellor on the University which was challenged by the Rivers State University of Science and Technology ASUU. A total strike was declared and our branch of ASUU broke into 2 factions. Re-engagement registers were opened for all lecturers to sign if you are still interested in your job and to work with the imposed Vice Chancellor. All those who signed the re-engagement register were paid their withheld salaries and re-absorbed, while those who did not sign had their appointments terminated by the Governing Council. The sacked ASUU activists and other lecturers who were sacked proceeded to the National Industrial Court, but all they had were adjournments upon adjournments. They later got a political solution to the problem since it obvious they would not get justice from the courts.

Tantua (2015) carried out a study on ‘Trade Union Activism Among Academic Staff and Career Advancement in South–South Universities in Nigeria’ and certain interesting revelations were brought to limelight. The management of the South–South Universities stressed that ASUU see themselves or the union as a parallel government or administration, and as such the management of the universities do not want any body or union to rob shoulders with them and so they resort to victimization possibly to silence any opposition. Also, the disposition of a lecturer over the years of his stay in the university plays a role. According to the management, if any lecturer has been confrontational or has been critical of the policies of the university, then when it comes to promotion and to enjoy other benefits and perquisites of the job, that lecturer should expect it to be pay back time. The management of south-south universities also gave the alibi of not having a enough funds in the budget for denying academic staff their promotion.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is based on the Justice Ethical Theory and the Labelling Theory. The Justice Ethical Theory posits that an ethical decision is a decision that distributes benefits and harms among stakeholders in a fair, equitable, or impartial way.

The implication is that Head of Institutions and Principal officers should compare and contrast alternative courses of action based on the degree to which the action will promote a fair distribution of outcomes. That is employees who are similar in their level of skill, performance, or responsibility should receive the same kind of pay. The allocation of outcomes should not be based on arbitrary differences such as gender, race, or religion.

The Labeling Theory attempts to explain why certain people are viewed as bad and deviant while others engaging in the same behaviour are not. Labeling Theory recognizes that some individuals or groups in a system have the power to define labels and actually do define labels and go ahead to apply them to others.

The labeling theory attempts to explain why certain people or employees are victimized, sidelined, antagonized and viewed as deviants, delinquent, “bad kids”, “losers”, and are marginalized, while others whose behaviour is the same or similar are not seen in such harsh terms and are favoured.

Vice Chancellors, Directors, Head of Departments and other employees at the top hierarchy who have subordinates, represent the forces of law and order and who are able to impose definitions of conventional morality on others, do the labeling. Their label creates categories of deviance and expresses the power structure in the organization. By and large, the rules in terms of which defiance is defined are framed by Management and the people in the helm of affairs for the rank and file, framed by the wealthy for the poor, and by ethnic majorities for minority groups.

This reason is true of the educational system, where a superior officer or group of superior officers create an in-group and out-group situation. The work place is now becoming a war zone and employees are victimized at work. The tactics of victimization include antagonism, character assassination, verbal abuse, aggressive behaviour, cold shoulder treatment, denial of promotion, missing files, termination of appointment and also death threats among others. Members of the in-group are appointed into key positions and members of the out-group are stagnated no matter how hard they work. Also more courses are allocated to teaching staff that belong to the in-group to sell books and queries are given to staff in the out-group for the same offences for which there were no queries for members of the in-group.

### **CAUSES OF VICTIMIZATION IN SOUTH-SOUTH UNIVERSITIES**

One of the basis for victimization in South-South Universities in Nigeria is being a union activist. Trade unions are formed in modern times as avenues for protecting the worker against the rapacity and recklessness of employers/management and even the state by means of collective bargaining and consultation. Management most of the time do not tolerate the voice of any opposition and therefore the union activist is seen as been confrontational. These activities of the unionist make one a potential target for victimization.

Employees who are not union activists but criticize the policies of the Vice Chancellor or management are also targeted. Over a period of time, one employee or certain employees might be singled out as scapegoats. The persons likely to be treated that way are people or employees who stand out as different. Someone or persons who do not follow the crowd or someone who is not a sycophant. Some Vice Chancellors and bosses like subordinates who gossip and engage in



praise singing. Some Vice Chancellors also like subordinates who boot-lick and carry stories about people who do not like him or her. The scapegoat might also be somebody who minds his or her business and does not mingle with others. Staffs who do not attend the social functions or gathering of their bosses are also targeted as potential staff to be victimized.

Tantua (2015) pointed out that because of the existence of promotion not done in accordance with laid down university rules and procedures, and some Vice Chancellors watering the criteria to suit their allies, we now term some of our colleagues as professors starting with a small letter 'p' and some other professors starting with a capital letter 'P'. The promotion criteria are most of the time twisted and bent to suit the Vice Chancellors allies, and when such lecturers get promoted, they are termed professors with a small letter 'p'. There is some kind of unhealthy rivalry between the small letter 'p' professors and the capital letter 'P' professors. This antagonism breeds plenty of victimization between themselves and their perceived supporters. Some lecturers too, have more degrees than others. First class graduate lecturers and lecturers with more than three degrees are also not liked. Your acquiring a first class degree or acquiring more degrees than your colleagues makes you a potential target because you are seen to be favoured more than your other colleagues and as such seen as a threat. There are situations where the professional and academic qualification of the subordinate is higher than that of the boss. The boss therefore feels insecure and uneasy and would do everything possible to relieve that employee of his/her job.

Victimization again, sometimes begins with an unresolved conflict between colleagues. Conflict is endemic and part of our everyday life. As Ekpenyong (2003) put it, society is always in a state of continuous and perpetual bargaining. The resolution of one conflict tends to breed another. Bosses are also responsible for assigning duties to their subordinates and whenever a subordinate is assigned to a particular duty post that the boss feels is strategic and profitable, and returns are not made to the bosses, the subordinate is targeted for being ungrateful and is victimized.

According to Awake, May 8, 2004 issue, a confident person might be seen as the pushy sort, while a reserved individual might be perceived as shifty. The potential victim may also be different in the sense that he or she is older or younger than the rest or even better qualified for that position or job. Whoever the scapegoat might be, fellow employees or colleagues become nasty and brazen toward their chosen victim and thereby sense a feeling of relief from the victim's personal stress. Attempts by the victim to remedy the situation sometimes achieve little success and might even make matters worse. As the intimidation becomes more frequent and systematic, the scapegoat becomes more isolated. At this point, the victim of harassment is likely to cope with the situation alone. In addition, envying one another for the position of a colleague, his accomplishments, his family background, and his material wealth is common and it poisons the working atmosphere.

Employees who are good looking and are attractive to the opposite sex in the organization are also targeted. Some employees perceived as threats to the ambition of moving to a higher position by another employee are also targeted. Some staff are so ambitious to climb the hierarchy and occupy key positions that they do all they can to crush possible employees who might be threats to prevent them from achieving their ambitions.

For many employees having a job requires fitting in with a team of co-workers and helping that team to function smoothly as a unit. If colleagues get along well with one another, the work benefits, if they do not, the work suffers and the risk of victimization increases.

One of the things that can interfere with the smooth running of a team of workers is frequent changes in personnel. In such a situation, bonds are difficult to form. In addition, new colleagues are unfamiliar with the routine, which slows down the performance of all. If the work load is growing, the group is likely to be under constant stress. Moreover, if a team lacks clear goals, there will be little sense of unity. This may be the case, for instance, when an insecure boss spend more time in defending his position than in leading. The boss might even try to keep the upper hand by pitting colleagues against one another. To make matters worse, the structure of the group may be so loosely defined that certain colleagues do not understand where their responsibility begins and where it ends.

Colleagues compete with one another to be in the good books or in good standing with the boss. Minor misunderstandings are viewed as major insults. In effect, molehills become mountains. The ground work has been laid for victimization, mobbing and harassment.

### **THE WAY FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Victimization often begins with unresolved conflicts between workmates, persons or groups. Although some of the causes of victimization such as envy can hardly be resolved. One of the ways forward is that prompt attention should be given to misunderstandings in which one is personally involved. It is also wise to calm hurt feelings with tact and respect. Also deal with your colleagues as individuals, and not as a group. If someone appears to have something against you, try to sort out matters.

Most of the respondents spoke about collective bargaining and consultation to resolve issues between the management of the universities and the academic staff union of universities. The management of the universities also asked for enough time to respond to requests made by ASUU and other unions existing within the university. Some of the respondents also spoke about tolerance, understanding and dialogue for a healthy relationship between parties.

There is also need to raise a standing reconciliation/grievance handling committee which should have religious body leaders as its members. Conflict or face-offs can arise at any time. Therefore it would be necessary to have a standing committee to handle grievances timely to avoid it gaining momentum. The committee members should include religious body leaders who would be impartial and would not side the university's administration.

Awake, May 8, 2004 issue again pointed out that communication lines should be kept open because every employee benefits. One should try then, to communicate well with his or her boss and co-workers without giving the impression that you are merely trying to curry his or her favour. Good communication with your peers and subordinates acts as an antidote to stress. Make every effort, therefore, to get along with your workmates. This does not mean you should do things to please people, or you should agree weakly to everything that is demanded of you and compromise your principles, just to maintain peace. But a warm and friendly manner can

melt an icy atmosphere. One should also be careful not only of what you say to others but also how to say it.

One is also advised to avoid being either over confident or too shy. Also set reasonable standards of conduct for yourself. If colleagues tease you, do not try to match them by doing same. You gain nothing by blurring the boundary between good and bad behaviour. Treat others with respect and dignity, and you are more likely to receive the same from them. Give thought not only to your conduct but also to your dressing. Your appearance should be neat and should not be provocative.

In most cultures, industrious and conscientious workers are respected and highly valued. Hence, try to earn respect by performing high-quality work. Be reliable and trustworthy. This does not mean fretting over every task. Do not be over sensitive to negative remarks. Not every unfair criticism is tantamount to harassment. Granted, following such sound principles does not guarantee that you will never be victimized. Despite your best efforts, management or your colleagues might still pick on you.

It is best not to try to deal with victimization on your own. Organizations should establish a means for assisting their employees who feel they are being victimized and antagonized. It is in the institution's best interest to eradicate victimization. A grievance handling committee or a neutral counselor, either from within the institution or from outside might open the way for all parties to discuss the situation. Wherever such arrangement is available, a victim could seek help.

According to Awake, May 8, 2004 issue, it must be acknowledged that there is no guaranteed remedy for victimization. Depending upon the level and frequency of the victimization, some in this situation should choose to look for another employment elsewhere. Others might have little choice, as Jobs are scarce and resources that could provide help may be few. Victimization in the workplace sometimes triggers entrepreneurial pursuits if the start-up resources are there. Whatever the situation is, one should do his or her best to pursue good relations in the workplace.

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