

Subordinates' silence: the consequence of bullying behaviour and psychological insecurity among policemen

Subordinates' silence

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Abstract

Purpose – There has been a growing concern about employee silence (ES) within an organization. ES is associated with low creativity and innovativeness, unethical organizational practices, avoidable errors and safety-related issues. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the mediating role of psychological insecurity (PI) in the relationship between leaders' bullying behaviour (LBB) on defensive (DES) and acquiescent employee silence (AES).

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected among police personnel working in Plateau state Nigeria. In all, a total of 350 responses were found useable for further analysis, of the 398 copies of the questionnaire administered. A structural equation modelling technique was used via SMART-PLS version 3.3.3 to test the hypothesized relationship.

Findings – The findings of this study revealed that leaders' bullying positively and significantly influences both AES and DES, and PI was found to mediate the relationship between LBB and AES and DES.

Originality/value – LBB among the police has been under-researched, even when there is clear evidence of its existence. PI explains the mechanism through which LBB influences officers' silence.

Keywords Leaders' bullying behaviour, Subordinates, Employee silence, Psychological insecurity, Police, Nigeria, Organizational behavior, Policemen

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is a growing body of research evidence demonstrating the importance of employee participation at work in different contexts. From the standpoint of employment relations, one of the ways employees demonstrate their job engagement is through their voices (Weiss

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and Zacher, 2022). Employee voice has been found to significantly stimulate innovation (Shin *et al.*, 2022), knowledge sharing (Prouska and Psychogios, 2018; Fiedler *et al.*, 2021), psychological safety (Potipiroon and Ford, 2021) and a variety of positive work outcomes. On the other hand, organizations suffer when their employees either fear or deliberately remain silent. Knoll *et al.* (2021, p. 621) posited that “inefficiencies, low creativity and innovativeness, unethical practices, avoidable errors, and safety-related issues occur due to the employee’s withholding of views, questions, ideas, and concerns.” Furthermore, society is exposed to avoidable perils when employees withhold valuable information (Knoll *et al.*, 2019; Maxfield, 2016). In the police context, intelligence gathering and timely dissemination of information are required for combatting crime, making silence dangerous. As a result, employee silence (ES) leads to ineffective intelligence gathering and sharing, as well as misconduct in law enforcement organizations. Despite the importance of employee voice to an organization, silence on the flip side is sometimes beneficial in reducing information overflow (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008a, 2008b) and embarrassment to individuals and organizations (Dyne *et al.*, 2003). The institutionalized code of silence in the policing encourages the withholding of some classified information to protect the organization’s interest (Kutnjak Ivkovich and Sauerma, 2013) and sometimes vested interest, thereby frustrating police officers’ willingness to speak.

While the debate over ES burgeons, researchers have drawn the attention of experts on the causes and consequences of employee-related behaviour. Dong and Chung (2021), for example, discovered that ES influences task performance, while Srivastava *et al.* (2019) associate ES with burnout. In addition, Wang *et al.* (2020) found ES to be a mediator of abusive supervision, employee engagement and job satisfaction. This study investigates the antecedent role of leaders’ bullying behaviour (LBB) on quiescent or defensive silence (DES) and acquiescent silence (AES) among police officers through the mechanism of psychological insecurity (PI).

Workplace bullying is a dysfunctional behaviour that hurts subordinates and organizational outcomes. The phenomenon is misunderstood in the context of paramilitary and military organizations, where a fine line exists between aggression and discipline. For example, the system institutionalizes hazing as a norm (Brunetto *et al.*, 2017). It is a terrifying ritual designed to initiate and humiliate newcomers to prepare them for the established hierarchical command structure within the organization. Similarly, Koeszegi *et al.* (2014) found that the sexual oppression of weak female personnel is common by their superior officers. In Nigeria, it is common to hear that a female police officer is fired for starting a family (Eyongndi and Okongwu, 2021), giving abusers absolute control over their victims (Adejimi *et al.*, 2021). Researchers have attributed the culture that legitimizes the use of maximum force in conflict resolution among the security organization as responsible for their perception and acceptance of highly skewed power imbalance (Zamorski and Wiens-Kinkaid, 2013; Adejimi *et al.*, 2021), making LBB common among them.

Literature has associated LBB with narcissistic and toxic leadership (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2020). According to Reyhanoglu and Akin (2020), LBB is a workplace behaviour that causes negative emotions between leaders and subordinates, employees and peers. According to power theory (Brunetto *et al.*, 2017), imbalances in power between partners at work or home can increase tension and lead to interpersonal animosity. When this occurs, an individual may use retaliatory measures to address the imbalance. Bullies use various tactics to suppress their subordinates, including humiliation, threats, dominance and isolation (Garcia-Moreno *et al.*, 2005) through legitimate power imbalances.

This study contributes to the ongoing debate in twofold. First, the literature on workplace bullying, which is conceptualized as downward, horizontal and upward aggression (Rai and Agarwal, 2017), mostly emphasizes bullying as a general phenomenon. Limited studies focus on the specific source of bullying emanating either from superiors, co-workers or subordinates.

The focus on the superior is based on the premise that leaders can instill animosity or inspire workplace harmony (Kammerhoff *et al.*, 2019), with a strong influence on subordinates' work behaviour (Brender-Ilan and Sheaffer, 2019). Given the impact of downward aggression on subordinates' perceptions and freedom of expression, particularly in police and other military and paramilitary organizations, this study investigates LBB as a predictor of DES and AES among subordinates in the Nigerian police force. Furthermore, studies that assess both dimensions of ES at the same time are uncommon.

Second, this paper is a response to Harlos and Knoll's (2021) request for researchers to investigate the fundamental questions about the occurrence of silence in greater depth, by exploring the role of psycho-dynamic processes that influence employees' behavioural outcomes. As a result, we responded through the mechanism role of PI in the relationship between LBB and ES. According to Taormina and Sun (2015), psychological security is a sense of safety and freedom from fear and anxiety, whereas PI is a fear of risk or danger to oneself, resulting in emotional insecurity as manifested by negative feelings of hurt and sadness. Furthermore, feelings of insecurity have been shown to exacerbate unfavourable interpersonal trust and bonding in workplace relationships (Demir, 2008). In the light of this, we contend that LBB causes PI among subordinates. Subsequently, the fear of speaking up leads to silence, low career success, damaged relationships and negative effects from superiors or colleagues (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009; Milliken *et al.*, 2003). Another effect of PI is expected to be acquiescent silence, a situation in which speaking up at work is perceived as futile and uninteresting (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). As such, an employee has the choice of suffering in silence and hoping for the best or quitting when it is unbearable.

This paper assesses the predictive role of LBB, an aspect of workplace bullying, on subordinates' silent behaviour, based on anecdotal evidence that officers and men in the police are more forcefully obedient to superiors than their peers or subordinates. In addition, we investigate the role of PI in mediating LBB-induced silence to explain what makes the relationship between an antecedent and outcome plausible.

Theoretical foundation and hypotheses development

In framing of the ES model, we argue from the perspectives of the theory of power and Albert Hirschman's (1970) exit, voice, loyalty and neglect (EVLN) model to justify the various ways in which employees withheld their voices at work. The link between LBB and subordinate silence is traceable to the theory of power which explains that between partners at work or home, power imbalance may increase tension and interpersonal animosity, which may lead to individuals devising means to survive the imbalance (Brunetto *et al.*, 2017). Leaders who bully use excessive power to humiliate, threaten, dominate and isolate their subordinates (Garcia-Moreno *et al.*, 2005). This creates dissatisfaction, fear and/or retaliatory attitude towards the organization.

The EVLN model explains the response of dissatisfied employees to the action of the organization or its representative, which in this context is the leader. According to the model, "those who are dissatisfied can choose either voice or exit, depending on the degree of loyalty to the workplace" (Hirschman, 1970). According to the EVLN model, a measure of loyalty is determined by the subordinate's voice; however, engagement in either voice or exit behaviour could sometimes be costly, in terms of material and psychological resources (Uster and Cohen, 2022). In this case, we argue that excessive power expressed through bullying behaviour dampens loyalty, hence triggering negative responses, such as exit behaviour and neglect. On the flipped side, Hirschman (1970) added that when the voice option is considered costly and has the potential of success, people prefer it over exit (Dowding and John, 2008). Researchers (Lyons and Lowery, 1989; Rusbult and Lowery, 1985) extended the model to include abandonment, a situation when

employees consider involvement in changing a situation as useless. This behaviour is described as quasi-exit (Lehman-Wilzig, 1991), otherwise known as acquiescent silence.

In framing this study, we consider the two kinds of exit behaviour as: quiescent or DES which explains the exit behaviour because of fear of speaking up and the cost to employees' career prospects and well-being. On the other hand, AES, a quasi-exit behaviour, perceives voicing as efforts in futility (Knoll *et al.*, 2021) and often results in abandonment (Uster and Cohen, 2022). Consistent with this, Harlos and Knoll (2021) contend that quiescent and acquiescent silences are traceable to an array of antecedents rooted in individual and/or situational factors. Though other authors have operationalized silence to include prosocial and opportunistic (Kirrane *et al.*, 2017), we found the antecedent role of LBB relevant in conceptualizing silence from a quiescent and acquiescent perspective, particularly when the subordinate's loyalty and self-esteem are challenged by the toxic relationship with leadership.

Similarly, Taormina and Sun (2015) posited that PI occurs when a person is overly sensitive to hurt because of the uncivil and awkward behaviour exhibited by others. PI leads to the feeling of being unsafe and engulfed with fear and anxiety. Therefore, we argue that officers and men who experience abuse from their superiors often feel unsafe and become fearful and anxious about losing their self-esteem and their image among their peers and subordinates. This experience reduces loyalty among the subordinates (Hirschman, 1970) and, hence, elicits intention or exit behaviour, which is consequently manifested through quiescent or acquiescent silence (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009; Milliken *et al.*, 2003).

Leader bullying behaviour and employee silence

ES is interpreted as a deliberate withholding of vital work-related ideas or vital information relating to an impending disaster or opportunity. Silence at work is a form of communication expressed through cognitive, emotional or intentions which means approval or opposition (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). According to research, workplace mistreatments like ostracism, abusive supervision, mandatory citizenship and moral disengagement are predictors of ES (He *et al.*, 2019; Lam and Xu, 2019; Sahabuddin *et al.*, 2021).

Workplace bullying is defined as a workplace culture that tolerates aggressive behaviour among employees (MacMahon *et al.*, 2018; Rai and Agarwal, 2018). It is perpetrated by a superior, co-worker or subordinate, resulting in downward, horizontal and upward bullying, as defined by Rai and Agarwal (2017). According to MacMahon *et al.* (2018), despite the mechanism in place to resolve grievances between and among employees, cases of workplace bullying continue to increase. According to the EVLN model, unpleasant situations at work can challenge subordinates' loyalty leading to weighing the costs and benefits of speaking out versus exiting (Easteal and Ballard, 2017; Uster and Cohen, 2022). We contend that subordinates' courage to speak out strongly depends on the source of the bullying behaviour and the cost therein. Would a subordinate in the police force dare to speak out when their leaders engage in bullying behaviour or in a workplace where there is a power imbalance?

While documented evidence exists on workplace bullying and ES (MacMahon *et al.*, 2018; Rai and Agarwal, 2018), scholars seem to assume that disparity does not exist in response to the various sources of bullying behaviour. This study contends that police officers and men will respond to LBB with fear, especially in their work context, which is characterized by power imbalance. As a result of the fear of repercussions on their career and damaged relationships, they may tend to avoid the expression of negative emotions toward their superiors (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009; Milliken *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, the officers may attempt to retaliate against the aggressors by reconstructing their sense of self-worth through DES (van Heugten *et al.*, 2021). We, therefore, hypothesize that:

H1a. Leaders' bullying behaviour is associated with defensive silence.

On the other hand, acquiescent silence is the perception that voicing one's concerns and apprehensions at work result in futility, as potential recipients are perceived to be uninterested (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, some forms of bullying in the police context are seen as discipline or as a ritual aimed at initiating newcomers to the established hierarchical command structure within the organization, otherwise known as hazing (Brunetto *et al.*, 2017). Lyons and Lowery (1989) and Rusbult and Lowery (1985), who extended the EVLN model, claimed that the perception of abandonment can occur when an employee sees involvement in changing a given situation as useless. Under this condition, bullying becomes a norm, and officers and men often ignore the consequences and suffer in silence. As a result, we hypothesize:

H1b. Leaders' bullying behaviour is positively connected with acquiescent silence.

Role of psychological insecurity

Understanding the mechanism that links LBB and subordinates' silence is critical, and once identified and dealt with, it will reduce the stress associated with bullying as well as encourage subordinates to speak out. On the other hand, when subordinates feel psychologically secure, they freely express themselves and use available resources for the benefit of the organization, thereby achieving their work goals (Mao *et al.*, 2019). This study investigates the role of PI in mediating the relationship between LBB and ES. According to Li *et al.* (2018), PI is "a feeling of rejection, of being unloved, of being treated coldly and without affection, of being hated, of being despised." Such subordinates perceive the workplace as toxic, leaders and co-workers as hostile and a threat to their well-being, have a high external *locus* of control and desire a better deal and security (Li *et al.*, 2018). PI creates a sense of risk or danger in an individual, resulting in emotional pain or sadness (Taormina and Sun, 2015). In other words, PI causes undesirable states of being in which a person is highly sensitive to and easily hurt by the negative emotion expressed by others. Unlike insecurity, psychological safety promotes shared beliefs and encourages people to take personal risks because it is safe to do so (Taormina and Sun, 2015).

We argue that PI exists among officers and men whose leaders are bullies. According to the EVLN model, the level of loyalty determines employee's voice (confidence and commitment citizenship behaviour) or exit and neglect behaviour. Bullying which involves physical or verbal, direct or indirect assault on an individual (Rivers and Smith, 1994) bruises subordinate levels of loyalty. According to studies, aggressive behaviour thrives in workplaces where leaders bully (Vranjes *et al.*, 2022). Unlike peers' or subordinates' inflicted bullying, in LBB, the victim is helpless, particularly when it is linked to job insecurity (Shin *et al.*, 2021). Here, psychological distress frequently leads to guilt, shame and decreased self-esteem (Hallberg and Strandmark, 2006). A bullied officer suffers eroded self-confidence and commitment, leading to a flinched loyalty (Hirschman, 1970). Such individual may wish to retaliate against the oppressor (van Heugten *et al.*, 2021) by exhibiting exit and neglect behaviour in protest or as a result of low self-esteem leading to emotional pain (Taormina and Sun, 2015). We hypothesized that:

H2a. Psychological insecurity mediates the relationship between leaders' bullying behaviour and defensive silence.

As previously stated, LBB has an influence on subordinate officers' self-esteem, leading to the feelings of rejection, unloved, cold treatment and without affection and hated and despised, as described in PI. Police officers and men who face psychological and relational disorder, such as

insecurity (Yu *et al.*, 2022) and ostracism (Sahabuddin, 2021), tend to lose their voice. They believe that raising concerns at work is pointless, as superiors are perceived to be uninterested in their well-being (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). As a result, officers and men who are bullied at work express PI, leading to compliant silence (Figure 1):

H2b. Psychological insecurity mediates the relationship between leaders' bullying behaviour and acquiescent silence.

Method

Population and the sample

The study investigated the effects of LBB and employees' PI on DES and AES. The respondents were policemen and officers working in Plateau, Nigeria. The precise population of the personnel studied was not disclosed for security reasons. As the population is unknown because of security restriction, we adopted sample size determination formula by Cochran (1977), $no = z^2pq/e^2$, for unknown population, where (no) represents the sample size, (z) is the selected critical value of desired confidence level, in this case for a one-tailed test, (p) is the estimated proportion of an attribute present in the population, (q) $1 - p$ and (e) is the desired level of precision. We arrived at a minimum sample size of 384.

To determine the validity or otherwise of the hypothesized relationships, a survey was conducted to obtain relevant data using the adapted instruments. The survey was conducted across all ranks in some selected divisional units and the state headquarters after a due process was strictly followed. The questionnaire was administered directly by the researchers. Officers were selected at random during their morning parade, via simple balloting technique. We administered 500 questionnaires in anticipation of 50% response rate. However, 350 were received and found useful for analysis, suggesting a response rate of 71.4%. This is consistent with the advice of Nulty (2008), that a 70% response rate is adequate for an easy-to-reach population in an on-paper survey. This population frame in this study was deemed easy to reach for the following reasons:

- There is one known graduate of the university where the principal researcher works in each police unit.
- Having been convinced of the study's intent, the commanders of each units ordered the subordinates to cooperate with the researchers.

Respondents

According to Table 1, 84.3% of those polled were men, while 15.7% were women. This indicates that Nigerian police departments are male dominated. Of the 350 respondents,

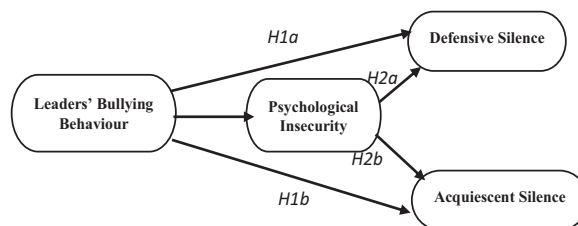


Figure 1.
Conceptual
framework

Variables	Frequency	%	Subordinates' silence
<i>Gender</i>			
Males	295	84.3	
Females	55	15.7	
Others	00	00	
<i>Total</i>	<i>350</i>	<i>100.0</i>	
<i>Rank</i>			
Lower rank	218	62.3	
Middle	112	32.0	
Officer	20	5.7	
<i>Total</i>	<i>350</i>	<i>100.0</i>	
<i>Work experience</i>			
0–5 years	144	41.1	
6–10 years	140	40.0	
11 years and above	66	18.9	
<i>Total</i>	<i>350</i>	<i>100.0</i>	

Table 1.
Demographic data

62.3% were operational men, 32% were middle cadres and 5.7% were officers. Furthermore, 41.1% of participants worked for 0–5 years, 40% for 6–10 years and 18.9% for more than 11 years.

A procedural approach was used to reduce systematic error variance among the variables measured. This was done following Baumgartner and Weijters's (2012) recommendation that a pretest of at least ten respondents be conducted. This allows the early factoring of difficult questions and similar items to increase the scale's clarity. In addition, we informed respondents about the purpose and benefits of the study to improve response accuracy and reduce social desirability (Hair *et al.*, 2019; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2019, 2003). This was done as a preemptive approach to reduce common method bias that emanates from the effects of self-response questionnaire.

Measures

To assess LBB, we modified the scale used by Farley *et al.* (2016) and Notelaers *et al.* (2019). It is a seven-item scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, designed to assess employees' perceptions of LBB. For PI, we adapted Taormina and Sun's (2015) six-item scale and two items from Griffin and Bartholomew (1994). The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79. For ES, we adapted the questionnaire developed by Jain (2015). It consists of four items for DES and three items for acquiescent silence based on the adequacy of original factor loadings and pretest outcome. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.74–0.84.

The measurement items for each of the constructs (LBB, PI and ES) and their sources are listed in Appendix.

Control variables

In this study, gender, rank and tenure were controlled because of the possible confounding effect on employee behaviour. According to Rosati *et al.* (2018), gender influences employee attitudes such as corporate social responsibility demands, trust and satisfaction; hence, we controlled it. We also controlled for rank or employment status in line with the finding of Gorriaran (2020), where it was inferred that employees' status influence their behaviour. In

addition, tenure or work experience according to [Tangirala and Ramanujam \(2008a, 2008b\)](#) has a potential impact on the voice; hence, it was controlled.

Data analysis

Assessment of common method bias

Before evaluating the research model, Harman's single-factor test was used to assess common method bias. The result revealed that the first factor explains 26.405% (40%) of the variance, indicating that common method bias is not a concern ([Babin et al., 2016](#)). A full collinearity analysis revealed a variance inflation factor (VIF) ranging from 1.825 to 2.021. Overall, these indicators of common method bias are not of any significant concern ([Kock and Lynn, 2012](#)).

Assessment of measurement model

The measurement model's quality in terms of internal consistency, indicator reliability and convergent validity was assessed and presented in [Table 2](#) following the [Hair et al. \(2017\)](#) guidelines. Internal consistency is maintained through composite reliability values greater than 0.7. The average variance extracted result supported the convergent validity criterion with a coefficient greater than 0.5 ([Table 2](#)).

In addition, the discriminant validity was evaluated, and the results presented in [Table 4](#) using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio correlation ([Henseler et al., 2015](#)). According to the findings in [Table 3](#), all of the heterotrait-monotrait coefficients are less than the conservative

Constructs	Items	Factor loading	CR	rho_A	AVE
Acquiescent silence	AES1	0.843	0.891	0.821	0.730
	AES2	0.899			
	AES3	0.822			
Defensive silence	DES1	0.843	0.884	0.805	0.720
	DES2	0.840			
	DES3	0.859			
Leaders' bullying behaviour	LBB1	0.839	0.917	0.893	0.650
	LBB2	0.843			
	LBB3	0.810			
	LBB4	0.819			
	LBB5	0.772			
	LBB6	0.746			
Psychological insecurity	PI1	0.845	0.88	0.818	0.650
	PI2	0.844			
	PI3	0.769			
	PI6	0.756			

Table 2.
Assessment of factor loading and convergent validity

Note: DES4, PI4 and PI5 were dropped because of low factor loading

Table 3.
Discriminant validity heterotrait-monotrait criterion

Constructs	1	2	3	4
1 AES				
2 DES	0.869			
3 LBB	0.759	0.768		
4 PI	0.76	0.862	0.784	

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard beta	Standard error	<i>t</i> -statistics	LCI	UCI	<i>p</i> -values	Decision	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i> ²	<i>Q</i> ²
<i>Direct relationship</i>											
H1a	LBB → DES	0.323	0.075	4.277	0.181	0.481	0.000	Supported	0.557	0.129	0.395
H1b	LBB → AES	0.411	0.088	4.648	0.247	0.590	0.000	Supported	0.493	0.183	0.354
<i>Indirect relationship</i>											
H2a	LBB → PI → DES	0.329	0.051	6.448	0.233	0.432	0.000	Supported			
H2b	LBB → PI → AES	0.239	0.066	3.655	0.114	0.366	0.000	Supported			
<i>Control variable</i>											
	Gender → AES	-0.061	0.034	1.341	-0.124	0.003	0.082				
	Gender → DES	-0.023	0.021	1.214	-0.114	0.001	0.132				
	Position → AES	0.005	0.034	0.068	-0.072	0.041	0.341				
	Position → DES	0.021	0.011	0.074	-0.076	0.082	0.471				
	Tenure → AES	-0.042	0.042	1.345	-0.082	0.013	0.134				
	Tenure → DES	-0.036	0.039	1.321	-0.080	0.021	0.214				

Notes: LBB = Leaders' bullying behaviour; AES = Acquiescent silence; DES = Defensive silence; PI = Psychological insecurity

Subordinates'
silence

Table 4.
Path coefficient

threshold value of 0.85 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015), indicating that discriminant validity has been established. To summarize, the model raises no concerns about reliability or validity.

Assessment of structural model

The outcome of the structural model analysis began with an assessment of the collinearity issue using the VIF. Table 4 shows that the VIF values ranged from 1.825 to 2.021, which is less than the 3.33 threshold value (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2006), indicating that the collinearity requirement was not violated. In addition, the outcome of the effects of the controlled variables in the model presented in Table 4 is insignificant.

Furthermore, the hypothesized relationships were then evaluated using bootstrapping estimation with 5,000 sub-samples (Streukens and Leroi-Werelds, 2016). The direct path coefficients show that the link between LBB and DES and AES in *H1a* and *H1b* is significant (p -values < 0.001), indicating a strong positive association. We followed the advice of Nitzl *et al.* (2016) to assess the proposed mediation effects of PI. Table 4 shows that in *H2a* and *H2b*, PI mediates the relationship between LBB and DES (0.329 and p -value < 0.001), as well as LBB and AES (0.239 and p -value < 0.001). A “complimentary mediation” condition as proposed by Nitzl *et al.* (2016) was established, as both direct and indirect relationships were strong and significant. Overall, the explanation power of all proposed paths ranged from 49.3% to 55.7% (Table 4).

To determine the significance of each path, the effect size (f^2) was evaluated (Hair *et al.*, 2017). The effect size is classified as large (0.35), medium (0.15) or small (0.02) using Cohen’s (1988) criteria. The results revealed that both AES and DES ($f^2 = 0.183$ and 0.129) are considered medium (Figure 2).

Discussion

The predictive role of LBB was explained through the mechanism role of PI, drawing on the parsimonious model that seeks to understand the complex nature of ES among the policemen. Using the EVLN model and power theory, we contended that LBB causes psychological uncertainty, because of low loyalty and power imbalance, leading to exit intention such as fear and perception of abandonment. As predicted, the result in *H1a* indicates a direct relationship between LBB and DES, and similarly, in *H1b*, LBB directly influences AES. These findings confirm that LBB among police officers has a significant influence on officers’ silent behaviour. This is consistent with EVLN (Hirschman, 1970) and power theory (Brunetto *et al.*, 2017), where bullying behaviour and imbalances in power influence subordinates’ loyalty, increase tension and resulting interpersonal animosity. Where leaders are brutal with power, the subordinate may use retaliatory measures such as exit or negligence to address the imbalance, particularly where the cost of their career and general well-being is high. The significant mediating roles of PI in *H2a* and *H2b* between LLB and both DES and AES were expected. This implies that police officers express DES as a result of fear, which thrives among them as a result of their superior’s bullying behaviour, which triggers a sense of PI. As a result, they must defend

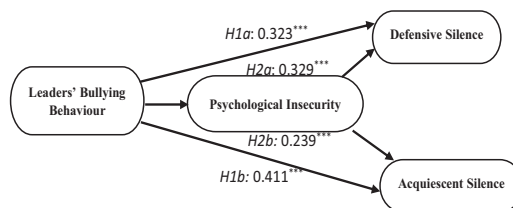


Figure 2.
Path coefficient

themselves physically or their careers from aggressive leaders. Similarly, PI mediated the link between acquiescent silence and LBB, implying that LBB triggers AES when policemen express concern that intelligent reports available may not be implemented because the superior officer has a reputation for ignoring deafening information emanating from them.

The findings in the direct relationships are consistent with the findings of [MacMahon et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Rai and Agarwal \(2018\)](#), who discovered that workplace bullying was positively related to ES. However, as previously stated, workplace bullying is a multifaceted phenomenon that includes downward, horizontal and upward aggression, all of which are assumed to have a similar impact on workplace outcomes by most studies. This study argued for a separate assessment of the various sources of bullying behaviour, which led to the choice of LBB among police officers. Furthermore, we found that LBB has a strong influence on both types of silence (AES and DES). However, in the Nigerian context, LBB appears to have a larger effect size on AES than DES, as evidenced by f^2 values of 0.183 and 0.129, respectively, though both are statistically significant. This implies some level of reluctance in sharing intelligence reports or innovative policing ideas with superiors, mostly because it is not often implemented and less fear for the personality of the officer or career retrogression.

The significant mediating role of PI in each relationship explains the mechanism that causes the change in the ES model. The findings support the hypothesis that PI explains why subordinates choose to remain silent even when they should have spoken. In the relationship between LBB and DES, psychological feelings that leaders may reject their opinion create PI in relating to the leader. Similarly, others' experiences and the leaders' emotional disdain hurt subordinates ([Taormina and Sun, 2015](#)). As a result, they chose to remain silent out of fear of the leader's authority, to avoid being on the wrong side of the leader and potentially facing victimization and other negative consequences in the future ([Jain, 2015](#)). In the relationship between LBB and AES, PI explains the psychological feelings of the policemen as follows:

- Superior officers reject opinions.
- The policemen feel emotionally insecure relating with the superiors and others; thus, they feel the emotional disdain expressed towards them, which makes them reluctant ([Taormina and Sun, 2015](#)), particularly about intelligence gathering and sharing.

As a result, they choose to remain silent, believing that the leaders would be uninterested in their ideas and that speaking up would be problematic ([Jain, 2015](#)).

Implication of findings

Theoretical implication

We made a modest theoretical contribution to the ongoing debate on ES through downward aggression, as opposed to the general perception held in previous studies ([MacMahon et al., 2018](#); [Rai and Agarwal, 2018](#)), which takes for granted the fact that some bullying sources (horizontal and upward aggression) may have less impact on the target's voice. Especially, when it comes from a police officer's peers or subordinates, the study also supports the framing of EVLN model within the theory of power such that when the concentration of power on the superior, which is meant for the accomplishing task is misused, subordinates' loyalty is affected, leading to exit or quasi-exit behaviour ([Lyons and Lowery, 1989](#); [Rusbult and Lowery, 1985](#)). This provides a theoretical understanding of the direct influence of LBB on subordinates' silence (AES or DES). Subsequently, the mechanism through which this occurs has also opened up a nuanced perspective to understanding PI as a consequence of leaders' aggression and as a precursor of AES and DES. This has not been established in the previous studies, and hence, the role of PI in the LBB and ES model is novel.

Practical implication

As previously stated, subordinates' silence among policemen and officers harms the organization's ability to fulfil its core mandate of intelligence gathering in crime fighting. This is evident in the recent increase in inefficiency in information gathering, low creativity and innovativeness in dealing with the threat of criminality and unethical practices such as police officers collecting bribes on the highway in broad daylight. Operational success in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria has been hampered by police officers withholding relevant information. The recent train attack on the Abuja-Kaduna rail line in Nigeria (Dirisu and Ibrahim, 2022) is an example of how the police intelligence unit must improve its information gathering and sharing. In the context of this study, police organizations are fighting an insurgency, and intelligence gathering is a critical success factor. When subordinates believe their leader has treated them unfairly, they may respond by hoarding intelligent reports or, worse, not gathering any, especially if they believe their voices do not matter.

Therefore, we recommend that a reward package be introduced by the police service commission for the most cordial operational team with shrewd intelligence gathering. We also propose that the Police Service Commission enact a code of practice that clearly defines the difference between bullying and hazing among officers and men to discipline erring officers and build confidence in the men to speak up. Bullies, on the other hand, increase PI, making subordinates feel rejected, unloved, coldly and without affection, hated or despised. This outcome undoubtedly hurts subordinates, resulting in disengagement behaviours such as silence (Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Having established the intervening role of PI in the LLB-silent model, we recommend that the feeling of inadequacy and low self-esteem that is typical in psychologically insecure victims can be ameliorated through cognitive intervention. Social psychologists (Stagg *et al.*, 2011) suggest the use of cognitive behavioural therapy as an intervention for employees that need recovery from PI and workplace intimidation. Interventions such as panic, phobia and post-traumatic stress disorder programmes can be a useful therapy in stimulating voice among victims of PI. Further, Fang *et al.* (2020) suggest that employees with low self-assertiveness display recurrent AES and DES. Such employees would benefit from assertiveness training intervention, by spurring their self-esteem and the capacity to still express themselves in a polite manner even in difficult circumstances.

Given the importance of voice in an organization, leaders are expected to develop policies that reward leaders who create environment for trust to thrive and treat their subordinates with dignity. Similarly, human resource practices that value subordinates' voices, such as inclusive leadership, employee engagement, involvement, empowerment, autonomy, consultative management, employee voice and citizenship behaviour, which are regarded as high commitment management practices, should be encouraged. Furthermore, executive training programs that include people skills will aid in the reduction of bullying behaviour among police officers. Similarly, an existing legal framework should be established to protect subordinates from bully-prone superiors and to promote freedom of expression within a professionally acceptable environment. Lack of speaking up is a complicated phenomenon with many underlying causes; leaders must be concerned about their role in subordinates' silent behaviour (Morrison, 2014).

Limitations and suggestions for further studies

Despite the study's significant findings and contributions to understanding subordinates' silent behaviour, some limitations are unavoidable. First, this study used a cross-sectional horizon, which may pose a threat to internal validity, though no evidence of this is visible in this study. Researchers may consider a longitudinal study approach in replicating this model in the future. Second, there is existing literature on the consequences of ES (He *et al.*, 2019;

Lam and Xu, 2019; Sahabuddin *et al.*, 2021) as well as the mechanism that explains the relationships between the constructs (Wang *et al.*, 2020). However, research on the predictive role of subordinates' prosocial silence on outcomes such as unethical pro-organization behaviour and other ethical concerns warrants further investigation. Other outcomes, such as deviant behaviour by leaders and co-workers, could also be investigated. These are the negative consequences of silence, which tend to promote antisocial behaviour that is detrimental to any system's corporate existence. Finally, according to Rai and Agarwal (2017), workplace bullying includes downward, horizontal and upward bullying. Given the power imbalance prevalent in the context of this study, there is a strong tendency to delegate high discretionary powers to the leader at the expense of the subordinate. This may result in institutionalized silence, especially in cultures where subordinates are not permitted to challenge the leader's authority. Can the same result be obtained in a civil or egalitarian workplace and society? Future researchers may respond in a different context to this. Finally, other sources of bullying (horizontal and upward) can be tested to see how much of an impact they have on ES.

Conclusion

The current study looked at how LBB affected silence. We hypothesized based on theory of power and EVLN model, that LBB is common because of power imbalance, which flinches loyalty, leading to AES and DES. The study also established that PI, which is a feeling of rejection, being unloved, being treated coldly and without affection, being hated and being despised, explains how LBB influences AES and DES. The results have theoretical as well as practical implications. Bullying from leaders, as opposed to workplace bullying, which was previously defined as including co-workers and subordinates, implies AES and DES. Mutual trust and respect must guide the workplace environment, particularly leader-subordinate relationships. This reduces fear and acrimony as such subordinates express themselves through intelligence gathering and sharing, creative and innovative policing and better societal well-being.

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Appendix**Subordinates'
silence**

Items	Source
Leaders' bullying behaviour	Farley <i>et al.</i> (2016) and Notelaers <i>et al.</i> (2019)
I have experienced unfair personal criticism from the leader	
The leader spread negative rumours or gossip about	
My leader makes offensive remarks about my person, attitudes and private life	
My leader uses abusive language at me	
My leader threatened me	
My leader unfairly questions my competence	
Been the only person excluded from social communications between colleagues	
Employee psychological insecurity	Taormina and Sun (2015) and Griffin and Bartholomew (1994)
I feel deeply hurt when my leader reject opinion	
I easily feel emotionally insecure by some leaders' behavior	
I do not feel emotionally secured in my relationship with some leaders	
I sometimes feel troubled by the suffering my peers go through here	
I can never be sure of what emotional distress will be expressed towards me by my leader	
I am careful getting close to some leaders sometimes	
Defensive silence	Jain (2015)
I remain silent because of the fear of my commander's authority	
I remain silent because I am afraid of ending up being the one in the wrong although I am right	
I remain silent because I am afraid of the possibility of victimization	
I remain silent because of the negative consequences in the future	
Acquiescent silence	
I remain silent because the leaders do not have an interest in subordinate's suggestion	
I remain silent because I do not want to be seen as a problematic	
I remain silent because we are to obey our superiors' orders	

Table A1.
Measurement scale**Corresponding author**Linus Jonathan Vem can be contacted at: linusvem@yahoo.com

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