

The Ethical Implications of Nepotism and Corruption in Professional Environments

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Abstract

This study explored the persistent issues of nepotism, favouritism, and corruption within Nigerian organisations, highlighting their detrimental effects on Human Relations processes and overall organisational performance. Despite longstanding rules and regulations, these vices continue to undermine fairness, honesty, and integrity, eroding trust in institutions and fostering a culture of impunity. Theoretical frameworks such as the Resource-Based View, Equity Theory, Genetic Similarity Theory, and Prebendal Theory provide a foundation for understanding these phenomena. Empirical evidence revealed that nepotism and favouritism harm job satisfaction, employee morale, and organisational commitment, resulting in higher turnover rates and poor decision-making. The Human Resource Manager plays a vital role in addressing these issues by implementing merit-based recruitment and promotion policies, transparent compensation structures, and integrity management systems. Implementing anti-nepotism policies and ethical guidelines by identifying and addressing potential biases is crucial for creating a fair and equitable workplace. Eventually, creating a corporate culture that prioritises fairness and equality is imperative for enhancing employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organisational performance. In conclusion, the study submitted that although implementation is difficult, removing these unethical practices is crucial for long-term development and organisational success.

Keywords: Nepotism, corruption, HR managers, favouritism

1. Introduction

Throughout history, vices have led to significant problems that continue to affect society, even with established rules and regulations. For example, Nigeria experienced an enormous estimated loss of N400 billion from its public funds between 1960 and 1966, with over N182 billion siphoned off through illegal financial activities from 2005 to 2022 (Okonjo-Iweala, 2014). This ongoing culture of corruption breeds more misconduct and embeds social injustice into daily life. It undermines core values like fairness, honesty, and integrity, creating an environment where impunity thrives. The erosion of trust in official institutions and the inconsistent enforcement of fair laws only worsen the situation (Suberu, 2018; Agu *et al.*, 2024; Abada & Onyia, 2020).

Developing countries like Nigeria struggle with poor Human Resource Management systems, which lead to hiring too many and too few qualified workers. Fostering strong, effective, and accountable organisations is a crucial goal that is undermined by distorted incentive systems and a lack of work ethics. Recruitment, training, remuneration, and staff welfare are just a few of the HR processes that are severely hampered by corruption, particularly when it manifests itself in the form of nepotism, favouritism, and abuse of authority (Kawo & Torun, 2020). According to Abdulai (2023), misguided values, a lack of accountability, and transparency, and unbridled greed are the main causes of Nigeria's

underdevelopment and the inability to address nepotism, favouritism, and corruption. This study attempts to close the knowledge gap regarding the role that HR managers should play in these memes.

This paper is organised into seven sections. The first section introduces the topic, second section provides clarification of key concepts. The third section illustrates proverbs that reinforce nepotism, favouritism and corruption in Nigeria's cultural practices. Section four explores the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study while section five reviews relevant empirical studies. In section six, strategies for Human Resource Managers to tackle nepotism in the workplace were discussed. The final section, section seven, offers conclusions and recommendations.

2.1 Nepotism

Nepotism, the practice of favouring and hiring family members because of their connections with someone in the organization, comes from the ancient Italian word "nepotismo," which is based on the Latin term "nepos," meaning nephew (Jones, 2013). During the Middle Ages and the 17th century, Catholic popes and bishops, who had no legitimate heirs, often showed favouritism towards their nephews by granting them high-ranking positions, akin to how fathers might favour their sons (McDougall, 2019).

Nepotism is a widely acknowledged global phenomenon, yet it often lacks extensive documentation due to its intrinsic nature. Parents often assist in securing employment for their children or other relatives in esteemed organisations, even in cases where the necessary skills are lacking. Research by Whiston & Keller (2004), Brown et al. (2004) and Zhu & Zhou (2022) provide empirical evidence suggesting that managers and those responsible for recruitment often show a preference for socially connected individuals, regardless of their abilities or qualifications. This occurs as subjective judgment tends to influence many recruitment and selection processes.

Arubayi & Eruvbedede (2022) mentioned that for organisations to achieve sustainable competitive advantages, it is essential to place individuals with the appropriate skills in the right roles. The effectiveness of a firm largely depends on the competence of its employees and the quality of their professional interactions, which can help counteract the detrimental effects of nepotism. However, issues can occur if employees misuse their authority to obtain jobs or promotions for individuals who may not be qualified, resulting in nepotism, cronyism, or favouritism within the workplace.

Nepotism and favouritism in the workplace have far-reaching consequences. They disrupt consistency in standards, policies, rules, and evaluation processes, weakening the system of checks and balances essential for effective work practices. Moreover, hiring less qualified individuals negatively impacts both departmental and organisational performance. Weißmüller & Zuber (2023) point out that nepotism can expose the organisation to legal risks. For employees, it can diminish productivity, motivation, job satisfaction, and morale. Overall, nepotism is harmful and costly for the organisation and its employees (Farahmand, 2013).

There are various perspectives on nepotism, both supportive and critical. Kokunda & Sun (2024) suggest that nepotism can be an effective way to identify committed employees in small family-owned businesses. Similarly, Ekemen (2023) argues that allowing nepotism can broaden the talent pool and prevent exclusion based on personal connections. Additionally, proponents believe that nepotism can create a supportive family-like atmosphere, which boosts morale and job satisfaction. However, despite these potential benefits, nepotism also has notable drawbacks. Hageback (2022) notes that it can negatively impact employee morale, blur the lines between personal and professional matters, cause family disputes, and prevent skilled non-relatives from advancing to managerial roles.

2.2 Favouritism

The term "favouritism" is coined from the Latin word "favour," which means "mercy," and refers to the unfair and biased support given to subordinates by those in authority, often at the expense of the

overall group (Awashreh et al., 2024). Safina (2014) highlights the connection between "favouritism" and related concepts such as nepotism, which comes from the Latin "nepos, nepotis," meaning "grandson" or "nephew," and cronyism, which involves preferential treatment based on long-standing personal relationships, like those formed at a university. These terms describe situations where individuals in positions of power promote friends or relatives regardless of their qualifications, experience, or achievements.

2.3 Corruption

The characterisation of corruption by Nanaghan et al. (2023) encompasses a spectrum of illicit financial transactions including bribery, embezzlement, and money laundering. In addition to these acts, nepotism and favouritism are recognised as supplementary components of corruption, extending beyond the commonly associated practice of bribery. Corruption within a professional setting hinders the efficiency, productivity, and effective management of resources in an organisation. Furthermore, it perpetuates a cycle by facilitating the recruitment and advancement of individuals predisposed to engaging in bribery, thus establishing a formidable cycle from which liberation is arduous.

Abada & Onyia (2000) argue that corruption, frequently used and misinterpreted in Nigeria, is a concept that is often not fully grasped. According to the World Bank, corruption is defined as "the exploitation of public office for private gain" (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2024:1). This clarification is often associated with politicians and public officeholders. However, behaviours and attitudes that contribute to corruption outside of this realm are not commonly recognised as such. In Nigeria, there is a limited perspective that views corruption as the misappropriation of public funds, a perception that has been reinforced by Nigerian administrations year in and year out.

Nigeria has long been viewed as a corrupt nation, a perception that has persisted despite various efforts by different administrations to address the issue. Since the first military coup in January 1966, each government has pledged to combat corruption. Abada & Onyia (2020) note that General Murtala Muhammed's administration in 1975/76 implemented significant reforms in the Federal Civil Service to reduce corruption. In 2000, the establishment of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) provided legal support for anti-corruption measures, followed by the creation of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003. Despite these efforts, Transparency International consistently ranks Nigeria among the most corrupt countries in the world. The 2018 Corruption Perception Index Report showed Nigeria with a score of 27 out of 100, a decrease from 28 out of 100 in 2017. Recent comparisons reveal that Nigeria fares worse than several West African countries, including Togo (30/100), Sierra Leone (30/100), Liberia (32/100), Niger (34/100), Gambia (37/100), and Benin (40/100). Between 1996 and 2018, Nigeria's Corruption Index averaged 20.76 points, with a peak of 28 points in 2016 and a low of 6.90 points in 1996 (Abada & Onyia, 2020:4).

Each new administration typically begins with a pledge to fight corruption, focusing primarily on public officials who have misused or redirected public funds for personal gain. Unfortunately, there is often little effort to address the deeper systemic issues that sustain such misconduct or to foster ethical practices that could prevent corruption. Despite their public commitment to anti-corruption, these governments often engage in the same corrupt activities as those they condemned in previous administrations. Furthermore, they frequently ignore instances of corruption occurring during their time in office (Abada & Onyia, 2020:6).

Corruption has a widespread impact on the Nigerian economy in several ways. It encourages tax evasion, which reduces the government's tax revenue. Government spending often favors private interests over public needs. Nepotism, cronyism, and favouritism in hiring practices weaken public institutions by ignoring qualifications. Additionally, excessive bureaucracy opens the door to bribery, while poor enforcement of contracts and property rights worsens the situation. Corruption affects all professions and manifests in various forms, including "quiet corruption," which involves high absenteeism, lack of effort, rule-bending, misuse of public resources, and ghost workers (Business, 2020).

3. Reinforcement of Nepotism, Favouritism and Corruption in Nigeria's Cultural Practices

Existing traditions and ideologies that promote cronyism, nepotism, and insular inclinations continuously influence prominent individuals within a society to make favourable decisions for their supporters, as highlighted by Nanaghan et al. (2023) and Farahmand (2013)

In the context of local arbitration disputes, a commonly used adage related to palm wine, a traditional alcoholic beverage from southern Nigeria, suggests that the drink allows a sip when it recognises a familiar face. This proverb signifies a culture of compromise and double standards attributed to nepotism, which undermines the principles of fairness and impartiality. As a result, arbitrators frequently encounter ethical challenges because they must ensure impartiality and justice, even when their relatives are involved in cases. This often leads to a tendency to be more lenient towards friends and family, rather than strictly following legal principles. This issue is also evident in political battles against corruption, where allegations against members of the ruling party are often ignored, as cases involving opposition members may be dismissed if they join the ruling party, indicating that political loyalty sometimes takes precedence over justice (Abada & Onyia, 2020).

It is widely believed that holding a high-ranking government position is often seen as a way to protect one's family and friends from financial hardship. This perception leads to appointments being valued more for the personal benefits they can bring rather than for their contribution to public service. As a result, the success of a public official is frequently measured by their ability to favour their relatives and allies, which can lead to ethical compromises and the misuse of public funds. This favouritism also impacts politics, where local interests are often prioritised over national concerns. For example, when a new leader takes office, they might appoint family members from their ethnic group, justifying these decisions as rewards for their supporters. This practice reflects a patron-client relationship in politics, causing regional disparities in expectations (Abada & Onyia, 2020).

Cultural norms often emphasise taking care of close relations before considering others, especially within political appointment circles. This tradition implies that those in power should favour their associates' interests, sometimes to the detriment of the public good. Corrupt actions by officials are frequently justified as a means of "enjoying" their time in office, and criticism of such behaviour is often dismissed as mere jealousy. Locally, there is a saying, "The stock of firewood should be exhausted if it cooks the food," which supports using valuable resources for political gain. This aligns with Machiavellian ideas where the outcome justifies the actions taken, leading individuals to engage in unethical practices for political success (Abada & Onyia, 2020).

Finally, there is an aphorism suggesting the existence of a mutual exchange of benefits, implying that providing an advantage to someone will result in receiving a favour in return. This belief subtly promotes the practice of bribery. This practice is also seen in government institutions where individuals in positions of authority request illicit payments in exchange for providing services or

unlawful privileges, disregarding the principle of equal treatment under the law in favour of personal associations. Similarly, the expression "use the eyes of an elder to examine what's inside the bag" exemplifies a tendency to show a preference for individuals of higher social standing in resolving disputes, often overshadowing the need for impartiality.

4.1 The Theoretical Framework for Nepotism

4.1.1 Resourced-based View Theory

In Barney's 1991 resource-based view theory, it is emphasized that a company's success and competitive advantage heavily rely on the abilities and resources derived from its employees. Therefore, a company must recruit a highly skilled workforce without any biases during the hiring process. This theory is significant for this study as it underscores the importance of the fair and unbiased deployment of employees, which is essential for a company's success and for preventing unethical behaviour (Barney, 1991; Gerhart & Feng, 2021).

4.1.2 Equity Theory

Adams' Equity Theory, introduced in 1965 suggests that employees are motivated when they see fairness in the balance between their contributions and the rewards they receive compared to their peers. If they perceive an imbalance, it can result in dissatisfaction and lead them to change their behaviour to restore fairness. This theory is needed for this study because employees compare their job inputs, like effort and skill, and outputs, such as salary and recognition, to those of their colleagues. If they perceive an imbalance where they are either under-rewarded or over-rewarded, it can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction or guilt, respectively. This sense of inequity can motivate individuals to adjust their performance or seek changes to restore a sense of balance and fairness.

4.2 The Theoretical Framework of Favouritism

The Genetic Similarity Theory (GST) suggests that genetic relatedness influences how organisms are attracted to or repelled by each other. According to Rushton et al. (1984), individuals who share genetic similarities are more likely to form close and supportive relationships, whereas those with genetic differences may develop aversions and create more hostile interactions. This theory mirrors the dynamics of nepotism, which involves favouring individuals who are familiar or related while excluding those who are not.

4.3 Theoretical Framework for Corruption

According to Joseph (1987), the prebendal theory suggests that individuals in positions of power view state resources as opportunities to gain material advantages for themselves, their supporters, and their relatives. This viewpoint signifies a common belief in the right to access the funds of the Nigerian state. Politicians, civil servants, and those aligned with specific ethnic and religious groups frequently consider themselves entitled to a share of the government's financial resources (Abada & Onyia, 2020).

This theory argues that individuals in public office may abuse their roles, treating them as personal assets within the government. Central to prebendalism is the concept of "authority theft," as outlined by Joseph (1987). This refers to officials unlawfully appropriating the power associated with their positions. Instead of serving the public interest, these officials use their roles to exploit state resources for personal benefit. This behaviour involves prominent figures in government openly violating the rule of law for their advantage.

5.1 Empirical Review of Nepotism

This section describes studies on favouritism, nepotism and corruption within organisations, emphasising its influence on the organisations, employees, and the broader society.

Jimoh & Thomas (2021) highlight that nepotism, viewed as a form of discrimination within organisations, can significantly undermine organisational efficiency and lead to higher employee turnover. When employees perceive that personal connections are prioritised over merit in career advancement, they may feel that the system is unfair. Consequently, nepotism and cronyism within an organisation can result in varying levels of job satisfaction among employees. Addressing overall employee satisfaction becomes challenging when leaders exhibit bias by favouring certain individuals during recruitment and promotion processes (Hector, 2012). Favouritism often leads to increased employee departures, a trend particularly noted in smaller companies in developing countries (Arasli & Tumer, 2000).

Pisheh (2011) observed that widespread nepotism within an organization consistently affects employees' perceptions, often leading to a lack of interest in their career growth. When employees feel obstructed by nepotism, they may become psychologically disengaged, concentrating solely on routine tasks without prospects for advancement. Favouritism as a major source of organizational conflict and stress, arises from political manoeuvring and power struggles within the organizational framework. Ultimately, such favouritism can result in poor decision-making by leaders, which negatively impacts employees' motivation and productivity (Pisheh, 2011).

Abbas et al. (2021) found that nepotism directly diminishes job satisfaction among those affected, which in turn is associated with a higher likelihood of employees intending to leave the organization. Job satisfaction serves as a mediating variable in the relationship between perceived nepotism and employees' intentions to resign, as well as between perceived nepotism and negative word-of-mouth behaviour.

Farahmand (2013) proposed that there is a connection between nepotism and turnover intention, but the relationship between nepotism and employee job satisfaction seems weak and insignificant. Additionally, Pelit et al. (2015) discovered that nepotism is linked to silence and alienation within an organisation and is negatively associated with organisational commitment. Similarly, Rowshan et al. (2015) argued that nepotism creates challenges for employee performance and needs to be effectively managed within organisations to overcome intra-organisational obstacles. Furthermore, Nadeem et al. (2015) revealed that favouritism, nepotism, and cronyism have a negative impact on job satisfaction.

Nepotism has the potential to engender complacency among individuals who become aware of the availability of job opportunities based on familial connections, possibly undermining their motivation to work diligently. Conversely, those lacking such support often feel driven to take charge of their destinies. Unfortunately, nepotism frequently impedes the efforts of deserving individuals, unless they exhibit unwavering determination and resilience (Amobi et al., 2019).

5.2 Empirical Review of Favouritism

Worika (2022) suggests that showing favouritism can be classified as a form of corrupt behaviour observed in the decision-making procedures within politics, presenting a major obstacle for governmental administrations in nations with vulnerable institutional frameworks.

In corporate environments, behaviours driven by ethnocentrism, nepotism, and favouritism are frequently observed (Amundsen, 1999). When preferential treatment is prevalent, the human resources department often lacks the independence to perform its functions effectively. Consequently, it becomes unlikely that appointments will be based on merit and expertise, which mirrors the situation in Nigeria.

When employees face competition from a privileged individual, their chances for advancement are notably reduced. Moreover, being supervised by an inept individual generates favouritism which causes distress among employees. The disparity between their efforts and the rewards they obtain

fosters feelings of unfairness in the workforce. As a result, the resultant erosion of confidence adversely affects job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and individual performance (Amobi et al., 2019).

Safina (2014) highlighted the detrimental impacts of favouritism and nepotism, which include employee demotivation, disengagement, diminished self-confidence and capabilities, social isolation, a sense of insignificance within the organisation, persistent anxiety, and negative anticipations such as fear of demotion or layoffs. Highly qualified employees are often bypassed for positions occupied by favoured individuals. This results in inefficient human resource practices, as roles are allocated to those lacking ethical and professional credentials. It also stifles competition for key projects or senior roles among colleagues. Favoured individuals often exhibit irresponsible behaviour, endangering the organisation's financial stability, undermining teamwork, and fostering an unhealthy organisational culture marked by intrigue and bullying. The unchecked influence of favourites in managerial decisions threatens organisational progress, as they impose personal biases on employment, contracts, transactions, and other critical matters. Therefore, the prevalence of favouritism and nepotism poses substantial risks to organisational development.

6. Role of Human Resources Managers

Employment decisions regarding recruitment, promotion, or compensation that were based on social connections rather than qualifications disadvantage the actual capable candidates (Kurec, 2024). To address corruption within the organisation, the human resource manager should adopt merit-based HR and recruitment policies, transparent compensation frameworks, internal audits, and integrity management systems. This includes establishing ethical codes of conduct, offering ethics training, and implementing whistleblower mechanisms.

Considering the influence of societal expectations, it is advised that HR Managers should notify a senior colleague when a family member or friend is part of a job interview. They should avoid being part of interviews or assessment panels that involve these connections to uphold the impartiality and credibility of the evaluation process. It's important to abstain from impacting the screening, assessment, or interview process for family members or friends who are applying for jobs or promotions, including refraining from writing recommendation letters or making introductions.

Dealing with nepotism in the workplace can present difficulties, leading to a sense of disillusionment among employees regarding the impact of their contributions. In light of societal constraints, managers or business proprietors may encounter challenges in effectively addressing these irregularities. Wajidi and Shabib-ul-Hasan (2023) propose that Human Resource Managers could tackle nepotism by employing legal measures or by fostering a corporate environment that discourages unjust treatment. The introduction of an anti-nepotism policy within the organisation could serve as a safeguard against such issues and promote a favourable corporate culture, contingent upon the ethical position adopted by the HR Manager.

Recognition of this behaviour within oneself and others is of paramount importance. Employees must be encouraged to advance based on merit, ensuring fair compensation for their contributions. Should the need to hire a close relative arise, the HR Manager should impartially implement standardised HR management policies, treating the candidate equally with other employees.

7.1 Recommendations

To ease the adverse impacts of nepotism, favouritism, and corruption within organisations, particularly in developing nations such as Nigeria, a comprehensive strategy is required. First, Human Resource Managers should adopt and rigorously enforce merit-based recruitment and promotion practices to ensure that positions are filled based on qualifications and competencies rather than personal affiliations. Also, transparent compensation frameworks, internal audits, and robust integrity management systems, including codes of ethics, ethics training programs, and whistleblower mechanisms, should be instituted to enhance accountability and deter corrupt behaviour.

Furthermore, HR Managers should recognize and mitigate potential biases by avoiding participation in recruitment or assessment processes involving family members or friends. Introducing anti-nepotism policies can help foster a corporate culture that discourages unjust treatment and supports fair competition. Ultimately, creating an environment that values fairness and equality is essential for enhancing employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational performance.

7.2 Concluding Remarks

This study examined the ethical implications of kinship preference, partiality, and malpractice in professional environments. Eliminating these behaviours from the workplace may present challenges, as they are deeply rooted in human tendencies. Nonetheless, supervisors need to cultivate a work culture that prioritizes fairness and equality.

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