GENDER VARIATIONS, STRESS LEVELS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS OF STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

By

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Abstract

Several factors have been identified as being responsible for the poor academic achievements of students in Nigerian Universities. However, stress levels experienced by students, could be other plausible factor that could be implicated. This study was a descriptive survey design which aims at investigating the possible effects of gender and stress levels on students' academic achievements. The population for this study comprised all Nigerian University students in the South East Geo-Political Zone (Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo). The sample consists of one thousand eight hundred (1800) respondents from the six randomly selected universities. Three research questions and three hypotheses were generated for the study. A research instrument called Stress Rating Scale for Students; (SRSS) was developed and used for data collection. A proforma was also developed and used for collection of students' GP on their General Studies GS (Use of English). Data collected were analyzed using chi-square statistics; Mean Ratings; Frequency and Percentage

Distributions. Results show that a significant difference exists between the academic achievements of male and female Nigerian university students who experienced high and low levels of stress. Stress level was also found to be a great contributor to students' poor academic achievements. It was therefore recommended among others that, educational psychologists and counselors should introduce more appropriate coping strategies which will help students to overcome their stressors.

Background to the Study

There has been a public outcry on the continual decline in the standard of education in the country especially as indicated in the public examinations and the performance of graduates of higher institution in their various areas of employment. For instance, the Federal Ministry of Education (2006) reported that only an average of 13.8 percent and 20.72 percent of candidates who sat for the West African Senior School Certificate Exanimation (WASSCE) and the National Exanimation Council (NECO) between 2000 and 2006 had five credits including Mathematics and English respectively.

The poor spate of performance was not limited to WAEC and NECO results; Onyiliofo (2008) also reported that the employers of labour complained about the low performance of graduates from the nation's institutions of higher learning. Okereke and Uzomah (2010) noted the out cry of parents, lecturers and governments over the deteriorating quality of tertiary education in Nigeria. This, according to Azikwe (2004), could be adduced from the result of World University ranking carried out in 2004 where no Nigerian University made it within the best 200 Universities. Dike (2002) declared that the decline in standard of education is continually leading to the production of ill-informed graduates who are unable to contribute positively to the societal development.

A number of factors according to the previous researchers accounts for the observed decline in students' performance. For instance, Dike (2002), claimed that the number of Inspectors of Education is grossly inadequate. In the same vein, education stakeholders have blamed the quality assurance agents (Inspectors of Education) for the negative development. Other researchers such as Adiotome (2006), Babalola (2006), Olushola (2008), Eze (2008), and Ofoefula (2009), attributed the decline in the standard of education in Nigeria to: unqualified teachers, poor policy formulation and implementation problems, constant strikes, poor study habits, corruption, poor budgetary allocations to education and lack of study materials and amenities for students.

It has also been observed that the poor performance is worst among female students. Poor academic achievement among female students has also been attributed to several factors. Eze (2008) viewed this problem as that which is associated with educational development of the country; for example, expansion of schools by the Federal or State government without proper fiscal and academic planning, shortage of qualified teachers and inadequate provision of essential equipment in all schools. Amao (2008) attributed female backwardness in education to home and marital responsibilities, cultural bias of male's superiority over females, urge for early marriage and pressure from male teachers/lecturers. Bandele (2008), attributed female poor performance to low parental expectation for girls, public regard for women as being inferior, domestic responsibilities, increased poverty level among Africans and insufficient self confidence among girls.

Similarly, while acknowledging the importance of such factors, the researchers are of the opinion that another plausible explanation for poor academic achievement may be the stress levels experienced by the students. This is because stress is a universal phenomenon that can affect both male and female students academically. Stress is a state of tension which occurs when an individual's adaptive capacity is unable to meet the demands placed on it (Ipem, 2005). Adeoye, (1992) similarly defined stress as the syndrome which occurs in people as a result of perceived inability to cope with demands of living, working or other life situations or events. Stress occurs when there are demands on a person which taxes or exceed his adjusting recourses (Fawole, 2004).

The effect of stress on students' performance has been extensively investigated. A good number of researchers in this area advocate that people need a certain level of stress to remain productive (Adegoroye, 1995, Oladimeji, 2000, Alao, 2003, Mapfumo, Shumba and Daniel, 2008). As noted by Kaplan and Sadock (2000), learning and memory can be affected by stress. Adeoye (2009) identified stress as the single most important factor which debilitates the students and inhibits performance. Selye (1980) also stated that stress could be disastrous to health and that an unhealthy student cannot give his best to academic work. A University student who is not satisfied with his/her study may be prone to stress and a distressed student who has no adequate knowledge of stress or how to cope or manage stressful situations may become more depressed and frustrated. This can lead to poor student-lecturer relationship, low or poor academic performance which may eventually jeopardize the learning objectives (Alao, 2003).

Students may experience different levels of stress. Stress level is seen as the amount of perceived inability of students to cope with home and school activities. It is the extent to which an individual student experiences tensions, worries, pressures and anxiety in the process of pursuing his/her academic career. High level of stress can lead

to poor academic achievement, examination malpractice and fear of failure, (Erickson & Paul, 1994). Abdulahi (1999) also reported that high level of stress, if chronically sustained, can contribute significantly to lowering of people's energy level and also weaken their immune systems.

Of great interest to this study also, is to find out, if differences in gender can influence students academically. Gender, in this study, goes beyond male and female perception. It is conceived as a social construct, social attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female and the relationships between women and men and/ or boys and girls as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. This is in line with the standing of the social scientists scholars Eagly & Wood (2000) who did not locate the cause of psychological gender differences in biological dispositions, but argued that these differences mainly result from the contrasting roles of females and males. Babette (2000) asserted that gender determines what is expected of, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. Gender is the position of men and women in the society. It refers to roles and responsibilities ascribed or allowed to either a man or a woman by the society. Alcoff (2006) opined that gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. This implies that, all humans, whether male or female, sex is fixed. But culture interprets sex bodies differently, creating feminine and masculine persons. For instance, in most cultures around the world, females have less power and status than males, and then, control fewer **resources (Betz, 2006).**

Statement of Problem

The decline in the standard of education coupled with the poor qualities of graduates produced in education system has led to public outcry among Nigerians from all walks of life. This is continually leading to the production of ill- informed graduates who are unable to contribute positively to societal development. Previous studies on stress and academic related issues by Adeoye (1992), Adeoye and Durosaro (2000) Alao (2003) and Ipem (2005) concentrated on stress among female managers; Stress among female academics; Stress among secondary school students; Stress and academic achievements of female University students respectively.

From the researcher's point of view, a common factor to these studies is the apparent concentration on external factors that could adversely affect students' performance without considering possible psychological factors among the students themselves which could be implicated. One of such psychological factors could be stress. Thus the gap the study intends to fill, to investigate the possible effects of gender variations and stress levels on academic achievement of students in Nigerian Universities.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the possible effects of stress levels on academic achievements of male and female students in the Nigerian Universities.

Specifically, the study intended to:

1 Find out whether differences exist in the stress levels of male and female Nigerian University students.

2 Ascertain whether differences exist in the academic achievement of male and female Nigerian University students who experienced low level of stress and those who experienced high level of stress.

3 Establish whether differences exist in the stress levels experienced by Nigeria University students on the bases of school types.

Research Questions

Three research questions was formulated and one was answered in the study.

1. What are the stress levels of male and female Nigerian University Students?
2. Is there any difference in the academic achievements of male and female Nigerian University students who experienced high and low level of stress?
3. Is there any significant difference in the stress levels experienced by Nigerian University students on the bases of school type?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the study:

Ho_1 There is no significant difference in the stress levels of male and female Nigerian University students.

Ho_2 There is no significant difference in the academic achievement of male and female Nigerian University students who experienced low level of stress and those who experienced high level of stress.

Ho_3 There is no significant difference in the stress levels experienced by Nigerian University students on the bases of school types.

Methodology

The research type adopted for the study was descriptive survey design which aimed at investigating the possible effects of stress levels to academic achievements of male and female students in Nigerian Universities. Nkwocha (2009) stated that the descriptive survey method enables the researcher to obtain the opinion of the representative sample of the target population so as to be able to infer the perception of the entire population. The use of survey design in this study is, therefore, justified because it helped the researchers to have direct contact with the respondents and obtain

direct information from the sample that has the characteristics, personal qualities and attitudes which are relevant to the current study.

The population for this study comprised all Nigerian University students (21912), in the South East Geo-Political Zone (Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo). The sample consists of one thousand eight hundred (1800) male and female students from the six randomly selected universities. (Federal: Nnamdi Azikwe University Awka and University of Nigeria, Nsukka. State: Imo State University and Ebonyi State University. Private:Madonna University Okija and Caritas University Enugu. This selection was done using stratified sampling techniques. The stratification was based on school type and gender.

Instrumentation

An instrument and a proformar were used for collection of necessary data for the study. A structured questionnaire called- Stress Rating Scale for Students; (SRSS) was adapted by the researcher from Sandwich Undergraduate Academic Stress Questionnaire (SUASQ), of Adeoye (2009) after a careful study of literature.

The Proformar was used for collection of students' GP on their General Studies or GS (Use of English). This constitutes their academic achievement data. The choice of GS course was justified because it is a general course approved by NUC to be offered by all university students. Stress Rating Scale for Students (SRSS) was a 30 item questionnaire with two sections. Section 'A' elicits demographic information such as students' matriculation number, faculties and gender. Section 'B' was divided into three parts. Part I elicits information on Physiological stress experienced by the students. Items in this section included: difficulty in breathing, rapid breathing, stomach upset, dizziness, etc. Part II elicits information on Psychological stress. The items include: low self-esteem, loss of interest on sexual activities, emotional break down, fear of failure and others. Data collected were analyzed using chi-square statistics; Mean Ratings; Frequency and Percentage Distributions. The instrument was content validated as well as measured and evaluated by experts in the fields of psychology, measurement and evaluation and guidance and counseling.

Furthermore, the 'SRSS' was pilot-tested two times at an interval of three weeks. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 was obtained. Finally the instrument was administered to 1800 students from the four randomly selected faculties. The questionnaire was directly administered by the researchers and was collected immediately. This guaranteed 100% collection.

It was fashioned on a four point Likert scale of Always True of Me(ATM) = Often True of Me (OTM) = 3; Rarely True of Me (RTM) = 2 and Never True of Me (NTM). Items that scored between 2.5 and above were termed to be accepted and influential by the respondents, while items below 2.5, were not termed to be influential.

Data Analysis

Research Question 1

What are the stress levels of male and female Nigerian Universities' students?

In order to answer this research question, responses of the students to items 1 to 30 that addressed stress levels were collated. The set of data were subjected to frequency and percentages and the results are shown below.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage Distributions of Stress Levels of Male Female Nigerian Universities' Students

Gender	Stress level		Total
	High	**Low**	
M	308 (42.8%)	412 (57.2%)	720
F	745 (69.0%)	335 (31.0%)	1080
Total	**1053 (58.5%)**	**747 (41.5%)**	**1800**

Data in table 1 indicates that out of 1800 students sampled, (720 males and 1080 females) 308 (42.8%) male students out of 720, experienced high stress levels while 412(57.2%) experienced low stress level. Then, out of 1080 female students 745 (69.0%) of them experienced high level stress level while335 (31%) of them experienced low stress level. The SRSS questionnaire was a 4 point response scale namely: ATM (4) OTM (3) RTM (2) NTM (1). Scale mean of 2.5 was used to decide on the high and low stress levels. Score above 2.5 were regarded as high stress level, while scores below 2.5 were regarded as low stress level.

HO1: There is no significant difference in the stress levels of male and female Nigerian university students.

In order to test this hypothesis, responses of the students to stress levels (High and Low) were collated on the basis of gender on statistical coding sheets. The set of data were then subjected to chi-Square statistical technique, at level of significance 0.05 as illustrated below.

Table 2: χ^2–Analysis Showing Differences in the Stress Levels of Male and Female Nigerian Universities Students

Gender		Stress Levels			Df	Cal χ^2	Criti χ^2	Rmk.
		High	**Low**	**Total**				
Male	Counts	308 (42.8%)	412(57.2%)	720				
	Expected	421.2	397.0	720				
Female	Counts	745 (69.0%)	335(31.0%)	1080	1	125.510	3.84	HO_2
	Expected	631.8	448.2	1080				Rejected
Total	Count	1053. (58.5%)	747 (41.5%)	1800				
	Expected	1053.0	747.0	1800.00				

$P < 0.05$

Result on table 2 indicates that the calculated χ^2 Value was 125.510 while the critical χ^2-Value was 3.84 with 1 degree of freedom and at level of significance 0.05. Since the calculated χ^2-Value was greater than the critical $\chi^{2.}$ Hypothesis 2 was therefore rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted that, a significant difference exists in the stress levels of male and female Nigerian universities' students. This was in favour of male students because only 308 representing 42.8% of them did what was less than 412 (57.2%) who experienced high stress level. This implies that more females than males were affected by stress in the academic arena.

Ho_2: There is no significant difference in the academic achievement of male and female university students who experienced low and high levels of stress

In order to test hypothesis 3, GP scores of sampled students in the use of English were collated and the average computed. The GP scores computed were transformed and categorized into high, average and low academic achievements. Responses of the sampled students to items 1 to 30 on stress levels were also collated on statistical coding sheets. The two sets of data were subjected to chi-square (χ^2) statistical technique with the use of SPPS 17.0 window version and the result is shown below.

Table3. χ^2 Analysis Showing Differences in the Academic Achievement of Male and Female Students Who Experienced Low and High Levels of Stress

Gender	Academic achievement		Stress			Df	Cal. χ^2-value	Critical χ^2-value	Remarks
			High	Low	Total				
Male	High academic achievement of male students	Count	138	235	373				
		Expected count	200.6	172.4	370.0				
	Average academic achievement of male students	Count	101	162	263				
		Expected count	141.4	121.6	263.0				
	Low academic achievement of male students	Count	48	36	84				
		Expected count	45.2	38.8	84.0				
Female	High academic achievement of female students	Count	171	55	226	5	123.469	11.07	Ho_3 Rejected
		Expected count	121.5	104.5	226.0				
	Average academic achievement of female students	Count	189	132	321				
		Expected count	172.6	148.4	321.0				
	Low academic achievement of female students	Count	321	212	533				
		Expected count	286.6	246.4	533.0				
Total		Count	968	832	1800				
		Expected count	968.0	832.0	1800				

Results in table 3 indicate that the calculated χ^2-value is 123.469 while the critical χ^2 is 11.07 with 5 degree of freedom and at level of significance 0.05. Since the calculated χ^2-value is greater than the critical χ^2-value, hypothesis 3 is hereby rejected and the alternative hypotheses upheld; that a significant difference existed in the academic achievement of male and female Nigerian University students who experienced high and low level of stress. This is in favour of male students. Out of 720 male students sampled, 138 experienced high level stress while 235 experienced low level of stress in their academic pursuit, while out of 1080 female students sampled 171 experienced high stress levels; while 55 of female students experienced low level of stress in their academic pursuit.

HO_3: There is no significant difference in the stress levels experienced by Nigerian universities' students on the basis of school types.

In order to test this hypothesis, responses of the students to stress levels experienced on the basis of school types (Federal, State and Private Universities) were collected on statistical coding sheets. The set of data were subjected to chi-square (χ^2) analysis at level of significance 0.05 as shown below.

Table 4: χ^2-Analysis Showing Differences in the Stress Levels Experienced by Nigerian Universities' Students on the Basis of School Type

School Types		Stress Levels			Df.	Cal χ^2-Value	Critical χ^2-Value	Rmks
		High	Low	Total				
Private	Court	430 (71.7%)	170	600				
		379.3	(28.3%)	(100.0%)				
	Expected		220.7	600.0				
Federal	Court	288	312	600				
		(48.0%)	(52.0%)	(100.0%)				
	Expected	379.3	220.7	600.0	2	90.048	5.99	
State	Court	420	180	600				
		(70.0%)	(30.0%)	(100.0%)				
	Expected	379.3	220.7	600.0				
Total	Court	1138	662	1800				
		(63.2%)	(36.8%)	(100.0%)				
	Expected	1136.0	662.0	1800.0				

$P < 0.05$

Data in table 4 shows that the calculated χ^2-value was 90.048 while the critical χ^2- value 5.99 with 2 degree of freedom and at level of significance 0.05. Since the calculated χ^2-value was greater than the critical χ^2-value, hypothesis 5 was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted; that, there was a significant difference in the stress levels experienced by Nigerian universities students on the basis of school types. This was in favour of Federal University students, 312 (52.0%) of low level of stress as against 170 (28.3%) and 180 (30.0%) of private and state universities students respectively.

Discussion of Findings

The results in this study reported a significant difference in the stress levels of male and female Nigerian Universities' students. The finding revealed that though both male and female students experienced stress in their academic arenas, male students experienced less stress while female students were on the high stress level. This implies that more female students were affected by stress than males in their academic pursuit. This is in line with the findings of Adeoye and Durosaro (2000) and Ipem (2005) who found that female students experienced stress from a multiplicity of sources and they are more vulnerable to stress than their male counter parts.

Possible reasons for these findings are not far- fetched. It could be as a result of the numerous responsibilities placed on them as house wives, mothers, care takers and in some cases, as bread winners of their families. This heavy work-load could compound their stress level and also affect their academic achievements. Also the

single female students were found to experience more stress than the married ones (Ipem, 2005). This could also be as a result of domestic responsibilities they engage in; helping their parents at home, taking care of their younger ones, worries about employment after schools and marriage.

The findings of this study indicated a significant difference in the academic achievements of students who experienced low level of stress and those who experienced high level of stress. It also revealed that male students performed better academically than the female ones. These results were in collaboration with the findings of Ghazala (2000), who found that optimistically-oriented students are academically high achievers. The pessimistic -oriented students were more prone to excessive worries and tension thus, low academic achievers.

The findings also reported a significant difference in the stress level of experienced by students in Nigeria Universities and it was in favour of Federal University Students. A plausible reason for this was the Federal Government involvement in funding and establishing Federal Universities in the south-east. Moreso, Federal Universities are less expensive than private and states.

Conclusions

Based on the results of the multiple regression analyses, chi-square, t-test frequency and percentages used in this study, the following conclusions were drawn Both gender and stress levels are good predictors of students' academic achievements. Though male and female Nigerian Universities' students experienced stress from different levels, however, female students were reported to have experienced more stress levels than their male counterparts. There were differences in the academic achievements of male and female Nigeria universities' students, and the male students performed better academically. Students who experienced low level of stress performed better academically than those who experienced high stress level.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are presented:

1. The governments and stakeholders should join hands together in providing facilities necessary in the schools for students' survival and success. Governments should establish both psychology and counseling units in every University environment so that as psychologists identify students' psychological problems, they will recommend them to the counseling units.
2. The University Health Centers should be well equipped and manned by well trained and motivated psychologists, counselors, physicians, nurses and other supportive staff because most of the students with high stress levels may be

3. referred to the Health Centers. Access to the University Health Centers should be improved for the students and also for the psychologists, counselors and all other trained and relevant personnel.
4. Educational psychologists and guidance counselors should introduce more appropriate coping strategies which would help students to overcome their stressors or stress symptoms.
5. There should be improvement in teaching effectiveness in terms of organizing, conducting and evaluating instructional activities and adoption of appropriate interpersonal relationship with colleagues and students.
6. Lecturers should improve their teaching methods, motivation and reinforcement for proper learning and understanding.
7. Policy makers and curriculum developers should concentrate on how to improve the schools' programmes and the curriculum in such a way that it can favour female students.
8. There should be an increased government involvement in initiating effective programmes that could improve academic achievements especially by making the environment more conducive and attractive to improve students' behaviour towards studies. Governments and school administrators should make learning environment conducive by bringing down the school fees, providing infrastructures and social amenities (good transportation, libraries, hostels, water supply, and electricity).

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