

Full Length Research Paper

Gender, marital status and religious affiliation as factors of assertiveness among Nigerian education majors

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Using an ex-post factor survey research design, the present study examined the influence of gender, marital status and religious affiliation on assertiveness of education majors. For the purpose of the study, 367 education majors were randomly selected from two institutions. This was made up of 96 (26.2%) males and 271(73.8%) females; 165 (45%) married, 191 (52%) singles and 11 (3%) widowed. Participants' ages ranged between 17 to 53 years. Validated scales were used to collect data, which was analyzed using univariate analysis of variance. The result showed no significant differences for gender, marital status or religious affiliation.

Key words: Education major, assertiveness, pre-service teachers, N.C.E. students, university undergraduates.

INTRODUCTION

Assertiveness could simply be described by Athen (1991) as the ability to express oneself as well as one's rights without violating the rights of others. In other words, it is the ability of an individual to express his thoughts and feelings in a way that clearly states his needs and keeps the lines of communication open with the others. It should be mentioned, however, that many people feel that attending to their legitimate needs and asserting their rights translates to being selfish. This is not so, because selfishness means being concerned about one's rights only, with little or no regards for others. Though being assertive has a number of benefits, such as the feeling of self confidence, and gaining the respect of friends and peers. It can also increase the chances for honest relationships and possibly increase the chances for getting what one really wants from life.

Lack of assertiveness had been identified by researchers like Althen (1991) to affect students both nationally and internationally (and a lot of arguments both within and outside the academic arena have arisen when both genders are compared with respect to assertiveness. Unfortunately there is limited empirical literature that actually compared male and female on assertiveness (Poyrazli et al., 2001). It is interesting to note that even in Nigeria, the same situation obtains; there is a dearth of literature in the area of assertiveness study that compares male and female on this variable (assertiveness).

Although, Adejumo (1981) observed that the general assumption is that men are more assertive than women (world over), where the latter become assertive: They experience unique problems. The fact is that, sex roles are somewhat rigid in Africa and gender differences are emphasized (Okeke, 1994; Onyeizugbo, 2003; Uchem, 2008). In Nigeria for instance, men are expected to be more assertive (even aggressive), ambitious and strong, whereas women are expected to be submissive, passive

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and gentle (Onyeizuigbo, 2003). Sex role stereotyping borders on sexism and thus imposes a limit on the extent to which women can assert or express themselves. For example, in the Yoruba culture (a sub-set in the southwest of Nigeria), the entirety of a woman's personal possessions is believed to automatically belong to her husband. This is in concert with the proverbial saying that, "The owner of the slave automatically owns the slave's properties." In other words, the woman is actually seen as the husband's "property;" hence, she is not supposed to assert herself.

In light of the above, one may be tempted to say that there is no hope for Nigerian women; however, a wave of change seems to have occurred particularly in Southwestern Nigeria as we have had women being deputy governor of a state, we have had a woman being the vice chancellor of a renowned university and a lot more are getting involved in politics and business with more freedom and support from their male counterparts. Consequently, women, particularly those in urban cities are more aware, now than ever before, of the need to claim their rights and assert themselves.

A review of related literature revealed that a difference exists between the level of assertiveness between males and females. For instance, Hersen et al. (1973), Ory and Helfrich (1976), Adejumo (1981) and Eskin (2003) all reported men to be more assertive than women. This was however, contradicted by some other studies. For instance, Chandler et al. (1978) found that women were significantly more assertive than men in some specific situations. Results of their study found that, women (college students) were more willing to be socially "confrontative," more willing to assert them and speak for themselves boldly without any fear of intimidation or prejudice in competitive situations such as job interviews, and are assertive about their feelings.

Despite the aforementioned findings, it is also interesting to note that Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) and Applebaum (1976) have found that there is no consistent tendency for one gender to be more assertive than the other. In a more recent international study on assertiveness, Poyrazli et al. (2001) found that there is high correlation between assertiveness and academic performance as well as adjustment problems. They reported that students with higher level of assertiveness are reported being more self-efficacious academically; this thus suggests that students who are more assertive probably initiate more academic interactions or ask for academic help and therefore have higher academic self-efficacy. This finding is consistent with those of Bandura (1986), Maddux and Meier (1995), and Chen (1992).

Part et al. (1992) found that one of the cultural differences international students are particularly concerned about is assertiveness. This is consistent with the findings from two previous studies which indicated that both male and female Finnish and Japanese college students and also female Korean college students are

less assertive than their American counterparts (Thompson et al., 1990; Thompson and Klopff, 1995). This implies that because of these differences, international students may become confused about how to interpret their environment and respond in a relatively more assertive culture. Depending on their cultural backgrounds, some of the students may not be assertive enough to search or ask for help on their own (Charles and Steward, 1991). As a result, they may be handicapped in their relationship with other students and lecturers who are considered as important in their academic pursuit which may invariably affect their academic performance negatively.

Considerable research has been done in the area of assertiveness, but most of these studies have looked at just one variable, for example, numerous authors (Gay et al., 1975; Hollandsworth and Wall, 1977; Kern, 1996; Kern et al., 1985; Kimble et al., 1984) all focused primarily on gender and assertiveness. Others focused solely on women (Wolfe and Fodor, 1977). Only a few studies have addressed a combination of such factors as age, gender and education (Cosmas-Diaz and Duncan, 1985; Melgoza et al., 1983; Roll et al., 1996; Soto and Shaver, 1982; Yoshioka, 1995). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to attempt to narrow this gap by studying the influence of gender, marital status and religious affiliation on assertiveness among undergraduates in Nigeria.

Based on the foregoing, the following hypothesis was stated and tested: Gender, marital status and religious affiliation will significantly influence assertiveness among education majors in Nigeria.

METHODS

Instrument

For this ex post facto field survey, the Rathus assertiveness schedule (RAS) was used as the primary instrument to measure assertiveness. It is divided into two sections. The first section assessed tapped for the participants' demographic data, while the second section was the Rathus assertiveness schedule (RAS) which has a test-retest reliability (0.77) and high validity (0.93) (Rathus, 1973). For the present study, the coefficient alpha of RAS is 0.62.

The research instrument was administered to students on an agreed date. This was possible because the students had already been approached and intimated with the research aims and objectives and those who indicated interest in participating in the study were informed of the date and venue of the test. On the agreed date, test instrument was administered to participants and retrieved on the same day.

Participants

Participants were 367 pre-service science teachers, randomly selected from two institutions of higher education in Southwest Nigeria. They were two of two categories: NCE (N=127) and University Undergraduates (N=240). NCE participants are pre service teachers that are undergoing the three-year teacher

preparation training under the Nigeria Certificate in Education program. The university undergraduates on the other hand are those who are undergoing the four-year teacher preparation training in the university to become professional teachers. The sample is made of 96 (26.2%) males and 271 (73.8%) females. 165 (45%) of the participants were married; 191 (52%) were single while 11 (3%) were widowed. Participants' ages ranged between 17 to 53 years.

RESULTS

The stated hypothesis was analyzed using univariate analysis of variance. Result shows that gender was not a significant predictor of assertiveness ($df = 2$, $ms = 0.77$, $f = 3.17$, $p > 0.05$). Analysis also showed that marital status was not a significant predictor of assertiveness of students ($df = 2$, $ms = 0.66$, $f = 2.71$, $p > 0.05$). The implication of this is that, an individual's level of assertiveness is not significantly predicted by whether he is married, divorced, separated or single.

In addition to the above, analysis with respect to religious affiliation showed no statistically significant difference. In essence, religious affiliation was not found to be a significant predictor of assertiveness among the sample set ($df = 2$, $ms = 0.07$, $f = 0.27$, $p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

The finding that gender is not a significant predictor of assertiveness among undergraduates contradicts previous findings of some researchers, such as Hersen et al. (1973), Ory and Helfrich (1976), Adejumo (1981) and Eskin (2003), all reported that men are more assertive than women. In the same vein, this finding is also at odds with reports of researchers like Chandler et al. (1978) who found that women were significantly more assertive than men in some specific situations. One would have expected that gender would be a significant predictor of assertiveness among the samples used in the study; this is basically because of the culture that operates in the setting where the research was conducted. This present finding may possibly have been confounded by the influence of exposure to higher education, which has brought about a change in the students' orientation as well as their cultural beliefs about gender bias.

With no disparity in the assertiveness levels of male and female students, it is expected that there would be a healthy competition among the students, which can facilitate academic progress and development on campus. The lack of a statistically significant finding of assertiveness by gender may indicate that the feelings of intimidation and or of being opposed, rejected or shouted down may be significantly diminishing.

Marital status of participants was also not a predictor of assertiveness among the students. A quick literature search reveals that not much had been done with respect to marital status as a variable that may predict assertiveness among students, particularly in Nigeria one

might think that marital status would be a significant predictor of assertiveness given that, culturally, the unmarried are mostly considered to be free and without restrictions per se. For instance, while the unmarried may make prompt and unilateral decisions on issues, the married may not be able to do same. However the finding of this study had shown that there is no significance difference in the assertiveness level of students based on their marital status.

Finally, the third variable of interest in the study was religious affiliation and the result of analysis showed that religious affiliation is not a significant predictor of assertiveness among education majors. This thus implies that an individual's religious affiliation does not have significant influence on his/her assertiveness, in other words, other variables apart from religious affiliation may more significantly influence assertiveness among students. The assumption must have been that in essence, participants might have viewed religion as a purely spiritual matter that has nothing to do with their assertiveness (which is a psychological variable).

Conclusively, this paper examined the variables: Gender, marital status, and religious affiliation as factors influencing assertiveness level of tertiary institution students. The hypothesis stated and tested showed that none of these variables is a significant predictor of assertiveness among education majors. The conclusion, therefore, is that other variables apart from gender, marital status and religious affiliation might account for difference in the assertiveness level of education majors, hence the need to conduct more research that will focus on other variables.

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