PERCEIVED EMPATHY AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AS PREDICTORS OF SELF CONCEPT CLARITY AMONG A SAMPLE OF NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES

by

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Abstract

The study investigated the roles of perceived empathy and social adjustment as predictors of self concept clarity among a sample of Nigerian undergraduates. To achieve this, the researcher employed cross sectional survey design method to randomly select 260 undergraduates of a Nigerian university. Out of the two hundred and sixty (260) undergraduates sampled, only two hundred and fifty seven (257) returned the questionnaire for analysis. The sample comprised of 114 (44.4%) females and 143 (55.6%) males. The hypothesis which stated that empathy and social adjustment would independently and jointly predict self concept clarity was partially significant. It was found that perceived empathy [β (257) = .044, p < 0.01] independently and significantly predicted self concept clarity. However, social adjustment [β (257) = .372, p < 0.01] predicted self concept clarity. Both empathy and social adjustment also predicted self concept clarity jointly with an R square of 0.145. It was recommended that schools should organize workshops/training programmes for both old and new students on how their self-concept clarity can be enhanced.

Keywords: Clarity, empathy, interpersonal relationship, self concept, social adjustment

INTRODUCTION

The social environments of academic campuses have been known to be arduous owing to the several activities students engage in and are confronted with. Academic calendars are often tasking, students are expected to attend several hours of classes in a week, with several assignment deadlines that must be met, etc.

Nevertheless, some students writhe through 'academic pressures' with good grades while, others do not. However, it is well established in the field of psychology that the study of self has many dimensions (Okoiye, Nwoga & Onah, 2015). Thus far, researches have not extensively investigated self-concept clarity among students especially in the tertiary institutions (Mittal, 2015).

This is particularly important, reason being that university campuses are filled with adolescents who are at the peak of personality crisis (Theo, William, Quinten, Raajimakers & Wim, 2010). At adolescence, young individuals attempt various personalities and it is a common observation that adolescents tend to temporarily adopt the conducts and lifestyles of individuals or a group of persons. They later turn them down for another on the way to finding their unique self (Meeus, 1996).

Empathy refers to the ability and tendency of a person to understand and interpret what another person is thinking and feeling in a given situation (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). To empathize is to show a shared feeling or thought in relation to what another person might be undergoing. In modern times, empathy has found its way to be more applied to human interactions with more emphasis on affective and cognitive components of empathy (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Empathic individuals may show significant self-concept clarity; this may be attainable because an individual must first understand himself before embarking on understanding someone else.

Empathy has both physiological cognitive or psychological offshoots (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee & Lehman, 2006). When individual empathize they either sense the situation non-verbally or infer by observing behaviours and mannerisms of the individual or group in a given situation. Empathy is often referred to a type of emotional literacy (Campbell, et al., 1996). This is because earlier literature has described empathy as a condition in which an individual infer or show compassion and genuine concern for the emotional state of another. Unlike sympathy where emotions are often sad or agonizing, empathy is often shown in more wide-ranging circumstances and various situations (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987).

On the other hand, social adjustment is a response to psychological and environmental cues by which a person

maintains stability or balance in the face of situations of everyday life (Afolabi & Durosawo, 2015; Weissman, & Bothwell, 1976). Maintaining this stability requires an individual to operate within ethical standards of approval. Booth, Rose-Krasnor, McKinnon, & Rubin, (1994) explained that social adjustment is a process by which an individual develop adaptations in behaviour to realize state of accord with oneself, significant others or the situation. Social adjustment has been described as an achievement as well as a process in psychology (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simin-Morton & Scheidt, 2001). The same way Afolabi (2014) defines social adjustment as the adaptation of the person to the environment or by changing the environment. Thus, interpreting adjustment and self clarity would necessitate effective behaviour validation.

Self concept clarity has emerged for over two decades; however it has been largely overlooked by researchers (Mittal, 2015). The reason for this has not been recorded in literature, though, several scholars have clamored for more research in this area (Okoiye, Nwoga & Onah, 2015). Self-concept clarity is often described as the degree to which the constituent self-concept of an individual are clearly and assertively identified, defined and understood (Campbell et. al, 1996; Usborne & Taylor, 2010). Self-concept clarity is perceived as a stable individual characteristic that can be assessed and subjected to scientific enquiry (Campbell et al., 1996; Meeus, 1996).

In academic environments such as campuses, interpersonal influences are almost inescapable and they tend to influence individual choice and decision making (Meeus, 1996). The self-concept clarity makes students less vulnerable to interpersonal influence (Okoiye, Nwoga & Onah, 2015). Self-concept clarity may be important or used effectively as a coping strategy to reduce outcomes of stressful or disconcerting events. Furthermore, in recent years, health care professionals, social support groups, non-governmental organizations (e.g., society for family health) and other stake holders in Nigeria have assisted internally displaced persons (IDP's) especially in Northern Nigeria by providing socio-economic support like orientation programmes geared towards developing self-concepts like self-esteem, self efficacy, self reliance, self confidence, resilience and so on.

However, in the last one decade, self-concept clarity in adolescents has been a subject of investigation in the United Kingdom, and the United States of America (Mittal, 2015) and only recently in Africa (Okoiye, et. al. 2015). However, despite the growing body of literature on self-concept constructs among adolescents, only few African studies have explored self-construct clarity among this 'special' group of children (Okoiye, et. al. 2015).

The process of self conceptualization begins with positive family interaction at the primary level, leading to proper school adjustment and social integration, and then leading to membership in a peer group (Singh, 2012). Some researchers have described social adjustment as a process of conformity, whereby well adjusted students choose to conform to socially acceptable rules and norms (Spruijt, 2007). These students exhibit the ability to find equilibrium or balance when socially related issues are eminent. Singh (2012) asserted that socially adjusted students demonstrate knowledge of school/social norms as well as expectations and consistently demonstrate a pattern of intentionally choosing to obey rules and abide by norms of acceptable behavior (Spruijt, 2007).

In view of this gap, this study investigates perceived empathy and social adjustment as predictors of self-concept clarity among undergraduates in Nigeria. Exploring self-concept clarity from this angle might help identify and proffer lasting solution to psychosocial requisite for self-concept clarity among Nigerian undergraduates.

In the light of these, it would be pertinent to ask some relevant questions:
1. Would perceived empathy predict self concept clarity among undergraduates?

2. Would social adjustment predict self-concept clarity among undergraduates?

3. Would perceived empathy and social adjustment predict self-concept clarity among undergraduates?

The objective of this study is to examine perceived empathy and social adjustment as predictors of self concept clarity among a sample of Nigerian undergraduates. However, the specific/major purpose of this study is to examine whether perceived empathy and social adjustment would jointly or independently predict self-concept clarity among a sample of Nigerian undergraduates.

The outcomes of this study would have some pragmatic relevance for specialized institutions like the Amnesty International, Society for Family Health, Ministries and Welfare Departments of various organizations in Nigeria. It would help to know where to focus self-concept clarity on and when to redesign their curriculum to develop, promote and sustain an enlightened society.

In addition, this study provides real-life relevance as it would help with learning and educational practice which will be useful in Nigerian colleges including universities, in training medical, psychological, social and human science students on the importance of developing and sustaining self-concept clarity. The results of this study, will also

inform healthcare professionals like Sociologists, Occupational Therapists, Psychiatric Doctors and Nurses, Counsellors, Psychologists and other stakeholders in related disciplines about the need and requirements for adolescents (especially those in tertiary institutions) to successfully inculcate the needed psychological attributes required for optimal behaviour.

Finally, findings of this study would have some practical relevance for other researchers as the study has ecological validity, conducted in a real setting using undergraduates from a Nigerian University. The findings from this study will serve as a reference point and stimulate more research in this direction among relevant groups and other researchers that are interested in similar studies. It would also be of huge benefit for academic purposes. The findings of this study will also broaden the knowledge of other researchers interested in similar studies because it will help them realize reasons why undergraduates need to develop and maintain self-concept clarity qualities needed for everyday interactions.

Hypothesis
1. Perceived empathy and social adjustment will independently and jointly predict self-concept clarity among Nigerian undergraduates.

METHOD
The study examined perceived empathy and social adjustment as predictors of self concept clarity among undergraduates in Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, AAUA, Ondo State. The study made use of Pearson Product Moment Correction (PPMC) and multiple regression analysis to test the extent and degree to which the predictor variables (perceived empathy and social adjustment) predict self-concept clarity among undergraduates in AAUA. A total of 257 undergraduates' participated in the study. Accidental sampling technique was used to select the participants.

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted in the study. The participants across various faculties in the Institution who formed a representative sample were accidentally sampled. Moreover, variables of this study were not actively manipulated. The dependent variable is self-concept clarity while the predictor variables are perceived empathy and social adjustment.

This study was conducted using ex-post facto since it attempted to explain consequence based on antecedent condition, determine the influence of a variable on another variable and also, that the independent variables were not manipulated but only measured.

Participants
The sampled population consists of 257 undergraduates during the 2015-2016 academic years. They were undergraduates

of a Nigerian University. Although all the 260 copies of the instrument were distributed to the respondents, only 257 of them responded to the instruments properly. This yielded a response rate of 98.8%. The demographic data obtained from the research study are as follows: The gender ratio is 114 (44.4%) for female and 143 (55.6%) for male participants. The mean of the ages was 17 and a standard deviation of 2.56. The research only sampled undergraduates from each of the five Faculties (i.e. Education, Law, Arts, Sciences, Social and Management). Only undergraduates who are currently on admission within the academic year were sampled. The research did not sample the post-graduate and part-time students of the university.

Instruments

The data in this study were collected using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), Social Adjustment Scale for Undergraduates (SAS-U) and Self-concept Clarity Scale (SCC).

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) was developed by Davis, (1983) and it was designed to measure empathy. The 28-item scale answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Does not describe me well" to "Describes me very well". The measure has 4 subscales, each made up of 7 different items. These subscales are: i. *Perspective Taking (t*he tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others), *ii. Fantasy (t*aps respondents' tendencies to transpose themselves imaginatively into the feelings and actions of fictitious characters in books, movies, and plays), iii. *Empathic Concern (a*ssesses "other-oriented" feelings of sympathy and concern for unfortunate others), iv. *Personal Distress (m*easures "self-oriented" feelings of personal anxiety and unease/intense interpersonal settings). The present study reported a Cronbach's alpha of .761 for the scale.

Social Adjustment Scale (SAS-M)

Social Adjustment Scale (SAS-M) was developed by Weissman & Bothwell, (1976) and it is a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "all the time" (5)" to "not at all (1)," consisting of 42 items within three dimensions called "cognitive," "affective," and "behavioral. Higher scores computed for each dimensions denote a higher level of social adjustment. Scores for the asterisked items were all reversed, so responses to them were rated 5, 4, 3, 2 or 1 rather than 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5. In general higher scores indicate better "social adjustment". With several questions it is certainly arguable that the "healthiest" score is 2, 3 or 4 rather than 5 for example questions; 13, 15, 23, 26, 31, 32, 34 & 36. The scale's coefficient of the overall scale internal consistence was .67.

The SAS scale has been used with many different groups of people including

standard community samples, arthritis sufferers (Staner, Tracy, Dramaix, Genervois, Vanderelst, Vilane, Bauwens, Pardoen, & Mendlewicz, 1997), undergraduates (Lloyd & Turale, 2011), alcoholics (Wild, Hinson, Cunningham, & Bacchiochi, 2001) and people who are recovering from heart surgery (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

Self-Concept Clarity

Self-Concept Clarity Questionnaire (SCC) was designed to measure self-concept clarity. The 12-item scale was developed by Campbell, et al. in (1996). The scale was rated on Likert-type self-report with 5 point ratingswith 1= strongly disagree to 5 =strongly agree. The author reported a Cronbach's alpha of .87. The SCC has been adapted to different cultures like Estonia, Germany, Nigeria, etc. Response ranged from 1= strongly disagree 2= disagree 3 = undecided 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree. Sample of items include: 'My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another', 'In general, I have clear sense of whom, I am and what I am'. The author reported a Cronbach's alpha of .77 while among Nigerian authors. Okoiye, et. al (2015) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .64. However, for the present study, a Cronbach's alpha of .65 was established.

Data Analysis

In order to determine the extent and direction of associations among the study variables, Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was conducted. Multiple regression analysis was also used to test the hypothesis. Some of the socio-demographic variables were codified. For example, gender was coded male 0, female 1. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 17.0 Wizard.

A multiple regression analysis model was used to predict the roles of perceived empathy and social adjustment on self-concept clarity.

RESULT

The first analysis involved inter-correlations of all the variables of the study.

The result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix showing the Mean, SD and Inter-variable Relationships among Variables of the Study

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	1.46	-	1					
2. Sex	1.44	-	.146[*]	1				
3. Religion.	1.05	.227	.057	.062	1			
4. Empathy	96.90	13.35	-.01	.106	-.09	1		
5. Social Adj.	-	-	.09	-.88	.11	.13	1	
6. Self-C. Clarity	43.05	6.27	.03	.09	.01	.09	.38	1

** $p < 0.01$, *p, < 0.05 N= 257. *P. Empathy = Perceived Empathy ; *Social Adj. = Social Adjustment Self C.Clarity.= Self-Concept Clarit*

In table 1 above, the findings revealed that age, sex and religion did not considerably influence social concept clarity among the sample. Also, perceived empathy did not significantly correlate with self-concept clarity influence [r (257) = .09, $p > 0.05$] among the sample. However, social adjustment showed significant relationship with self-concept clarity [r (257) = 0.38, $p < 0.01$] among the sample. The test for the formulated hypothesis was carried out using multiple regression analysis and the result was presented below in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Prediction on Self-Concept Clarity.

Variables	β	t	R	R²	df	F
P. Empathy	.044	4.681*	.380	.145	256	2.149*
Social Adj.	.372	6.352*				

$p < 0.05$ *P. Empathy = Perceived Empathy ; Social Adj. = Social Adjustment*

In Table 2 above, the findings of the study revealed that perceived empathy predicted self-concept clarity among the sample [β (257) = .044, p < 0.01]. Also, social adjustment significantly predicted self-concept clarity [β (257) = .372, p < 0.01]. The Table also showed that both perceived empathy and social adjustment jointly pulled an R^2 of .145 on the self-concept clarity. The results suggest that both perceived empathy and social adjustment jointly predicted self-concept clarity among the undergraduates. The results further revealed that social adjustments independently predicted self-concept clarity by 37.2% while perceived empathy independently predicted self concept clarity by 4.4%.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis which stated that perceived empathy and social adjustment would independently and jointly predict self-concept clarity among undergraduates was partially accepted. The results in Table two revealed that perceived empathy predicted self-concept clarity among the sample. This finding is in consonance with the findings of (Spruijt, 2007) who revealed that self concept clarity makes individuals more susceptible to interpersonal influence. Although, several researchers have suggested that self-concepts in individuals are motivated by self interest (Hodges & Biswas-Diener, 2007; Batson, Ahmad & Stocks, 2004; Luchies, Finkel, McNully, Kumashiro, 2010). Also the study by Dusek

and McIntyre, (2003) asserted that self-concept clarity is described mostly as an attribute that is self-directed unlike empathy which is characterized by extending beyond the self into that of others in a given situation. As such undergraduates with significant self concept clarity may show less empathic tendencies than undergraduates with less self-concept clarity.

Several authors (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee & Lehman, 1996; Dusek & McIntyre, 2003) have described self-concept in relation to domain–specific evaluations of the self. They explain that adolescents make self-evaluations in many domains, academic, athletic, physical appearance and so on. In sum, self-concept clarity refers to concise self-evaluations of the individual. These evaluations tend to limit empathy tendencies because empathic feelings are often directed outside the self. In addition, Hogg & Vaughan, (2005) have highlighted the significant role of empathy in adolescents with significant self-concept clarity, as tend to show high levels of independence or self-autonomy that seldom encourage empathic overtures. For example, undergraduates who live independently exhibit high personal standards, popularly referred to as 'mind my business lifestyle' with little room to show empathic concerns unless adequate attention is drawn to it (Luchies, et. al, 2010).

In Nigeria, self-concept is contingent on

cultural interaction and belief systems. It plays a frontline role in determining behaviour (Okoiye, et. al, Onah, 2015). For instance, adolescents who do not show empathic tendencies are often seen as lacking home training. Empathic individuals are remotely regarded as well behaved and considered altruistic. Thus, adolescents with significantly overt self-concept clarity are regarded as arrogant or having overbearing pride (Okoiye, et. al, 2015).

Part of the results also showed that social adjustment significantly predicted self-concept clarity. The finding of this study is in line with several studies (Booth, et. al, 1994; Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Demaray & Malecki, 2002) which revealed that the behavior of adolescents in academic institutions is an important factor in their general social adjustment. The school environment or campus provides the social context in which many students interact amongst themselves, and it is also where they inculcate considerable social skills e.g., social competencies, attitude formation, relationship formation through socialization channels, interpersonal relationships, and etiquette (Malecki & Demaray, 2003).

One possible explanation of these findings focuses on the likely effects of support structures or external cues like friends, and social groups. Presumably, undergraduates who are accepted by friends tend to possess an awareness of their own individuality that precedes their actions. They may exhibit a sense of belongingness that transcends into self clarity. However, the paucity of literatures that relate social adjustment and self-conflict clarity means this assertion is open to research investigation as it does not rule out other plausible explanations. For example, among adolescents having friendships with more positive features correlates with greater involvement in school, higher self-perceived social acceptance, and increased general self-concept perception (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Keefe & Berndt, 1996).

Lastly, perceived empathy and social adjustment jointly and significantly predicted self-concept clarity among Nigerian undergraduates. The findings of the present study are because social adjusted individuals are often able to adapt at putting themselves in positive affective states to avoid dysfunctional situations such as violence. Thus, they use this in adaptive ways to alleviate the feeling of frustration than undergraduates with low social adjustment (*Crick & Dodge, 1994)*. All these would make them develop social adjustment than their other counterparts. This finding gained support in the works of previous researchers who reported that the higher the level of physical violence of an individual the higher the social adjustment problems (Demaray & Malecki, 2002).

Recommendations

It is recommended that educational institutions should create an interaction/counseling centre where students' empathetic response and social adjustment could be re-structured. This is because the variables have been found to be important predictors of self concept clarity. In addition, there should be regular workshops/training programs for both the old and newly admitted students on how their self concept clarity enhanced.

Conclusion

In academic environments such as campuses, interpersonal influences are almost unavoidable and they tend to influence individual choice and decision making. The self-concept clarity makes students more atoned to self thereby developing clear self concepts that are important for social interaction.). Self-concept clarity may be important or used effectively as a coping strategy to reduce outcomes of stressful or disconcerting events.

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