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Effect of Sex-Stereotypes on Adolescent Sexual Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of sex-stereotypes on adolescent sexual behaviour. A structured questionnaire was prepared and distributed to one hundred (100) sample size of the participant. A pilot study was conducted to check the reliability of the instrument, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient yielded 0.73. A five point scale was used to collect data and analyses were based on frequency analysis and linear regression using SPSS 17. The results of the study shows that there was an emerging pattern of sex stereotypes among adolescent students, the tested hypotheses revealed that sex stereotypes significantly influenced the tendency of respondents to engage in risky sexual behaviour, $P > 0.05$. The results of the study also showed that respondents' age had a significant influence on adolescent involvement in risky sexual behaviour. An overwhelming majority of respondents who reported high level of stereotypes were male. On the other hand, a substantial percentage of respondents who reported moderate level of sex stereotypes were females, lending credence to the assumption that male adolescents were more likely to manifest higher level of sex stereotypes than their female counterparts. It was recommended based on the study that there is need for more in-depth behavioural study, focusing on the perceptions and experiences of adolescents in different settings and among out-of-school adolescents; various training programs on reproductive health and sexuality particularly sexually transmitted infections for gender-appropriate adolescents should be developed and facilitated with sensitivity to the needs of youth.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Sexual Behaviour, Adolescent

1. INTRODUCTION

A variety of theoretical perspectives have been employed to explain the causes of what have typically been considered robust sex differences in relationship attitudes and behaviours. Some theories focus on evolutionary reasons for differences, while others focus on the ways in which socialization might contribute to sex differences (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Researchers who espouse the evolutionary perspective suggest that sex differences in relationship behaviours and attitudes result from different obstacles to reproductive success that men and women faced in their ancestral past (Eagly & Wood, 1999). For example, sex differences in infidelity might be explained by sex differences in the "minimum parental investment" required to raise a child to maturity.

An alternative perspective, social role theory, suggests that that men and women conform to gender stereotypes because they are acting in conjunction with their expected social roles (Eagly, 1987). In adapting to these roles, they become psychologically different in ways that facilitate the roles they are filling. Similar to evolutionary theory, social role theory suggests that men and women are adjusting to environmental conditions. However, the two theories differ insofar as social role theory suggests that men and women are responding to existing social contexts rather than biological influences.

Historically, men in the United States have worked outside of the home, while women have traditionally worked inside of the home. In their role, men have learned to be dominant, independent, sexually controlling, autocratic, and less committed to relational issues (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Women, in contrast, have learned to be

more committed to interpersonal relationships, less driven, and more cooperative. According to social role theory, these different roles have led men and women to behave differently in and to think differently about romantic relationships. For example, because men are used to being independent and it is familiar, they tend to be more resistant to marriage where they would have to be in a co-dependent state. Women, on the other hand, are more concerned with developing intimacy in their relationships and exhibit an overall concern for personal relationships.

Stereotypes have been conceptualized as one social psychological phenomenon that is dynamic, fluid and heavily dependent on the social relational context. Multiple components contribute to this social relational nature of stereotypes. For example, the evaluations of a target are affected not only by the group membership of the target being evaluated (e.g., women target) but also the perceiver's group membership (e.g., female perceiver) and the content of the stereotype (e.g., how warm the women target is perceived to be). Of importance is the group membership of the perceiver.

The social groups that one belongs to influences perceptions of other individuals and their group membership. For example, a woman's perceptions of men and women are different from a man's perceptions due to her group membership. Being a member of a group such as women will affect female participants' beliefs about groups in a number of ways.

However, stereotyping exaggerates group differences and underestimates within-group variability (Mussen, 1969). In this sense, stereotypes reflect shared social beliefs, values and norms that dictate the roles of men and women in society. The term "gender attitudes" refers to the beliefs one holds about others based on their gender. This includes such ideas as endorsement of traditional stereotypes, endorsement of female superiority, disapproval of female casual sex or sexual initiative, and acceptance of male heterosexual violence.

1.1 Research Problem

Sexuality is an issue that many young people have difficulty talking about. Many Nigerians believe that sexuality and related issues must be regulated by the society to ensure stability and survival of family and societal life. Among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria, social control of sexuality is evident in sex stereotypes that individuals internalize as they grow up, and which are reflected in numerous social myths and popular sayings among the people. Sex stereotypes refer to statements about human sexuality generally accepted as true by people in a society, but which lack any empirical or scientific proof. It is assumed that people who believe in popular sex myths or stereotypes would manifest unhealthy sexual behaviours or engage in dangerous sexual interactions. It is against this background that the research seeks to investigate the prevalence of sex stereotyping and its effects on the sexual behaviour of adolescents.

The objectives of the study therefore are to determine the emerging pattern of sex stereotypes among adolescent and investigate the prevalence of sex stereotyping and its effects on the sexual behaviour of adolescents.

The hypotheses formulated were to test the significant relationship between high level of sex stereotypes and tendency to engage in risky sexual behaviour and test the significant effect of age on adolescents' involvement in risky sexual behaviour.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the construct of sexual behaviour and sexual assault and its causes requires a specific psychological framework. One approach that makes a significant contribution to the understanding of sexual behaviour (and sexual consent) and is primarily concerned with the external environment and social factors and processes that drive an individual, is that of socialisation. This study utilises the socialisation theory to help understand how young male and female adolescents have been socialised to construct their own meanings, perceptions and attitudes towards sexual relationships, and more specifically sexual consent.

Socialisation can be defined as a process through which people are acculturated to attitudes and ways of behaving that enable them to participate in society (Harway & O'Neil, 1999). The theory of socialisation is a premise that effectively explains the influence social factors have on attitudes and behaviour.

Vogelman (1990) argues that children require the moral codes, social skills and sex role behaviours necessary for proper functioning in society. While this is valid, it is also true that

'socialisation is responsible for perpetuating current sex roles and sexist ideas and behaviours which encourage sexual behaviour and facilitate the social control of women' (Vogelman, 1990, p.53).

In Nigeria and many other societies, socialisation is intimately bound up with the implantation of beliefs and ideologies as natural. There is the belief that certain modes of behaviour which are demeaning to women are natural, and are not susceptible to change. This has the effect of making one accept the social control of women, sexual behaviour myths and prevailing sex roles unquestioningly (Vogelman, 1990). Socialisation theory suggests that social institutions help mould experiences, attitudes and behaviour and that these in turn contribute to the incidence of sexual behaviour. The greatest significance of this theory is that it is believed that behaviour is the result of social rather than biological factors. It has however been argued that the socialisation theory is limited because it does not take internal factors into account. It is argued that the individual and his/her 'free will' are often ignored and the individual is seen as having no control over his attitudes, decisions and behaviour (Koss & Harvey, 1991).

According to Thorne (1993), gender role expectations are seen to influence a person's identity from birth and get ingrained in our personality. This influences how we see ourselves. Witt (1997) additionally states that a child's earliest exposure to gender-role expectations comes from their parents. She explains that from the time their children are babies, parents treat boys and girls differently. Girls are expected to be sweet and sensitive and boys are expected to be strong and brave. For instance, a little boy who wants to play with dolls soon realizes that it is not only his father that may find this unacceptable but also many significant others that he comes into contact with in his community (Vogelman, 1990).

There is also a basic difference in development for boys and girls. For girls their relationship with their primary care giver is one of mutuality. Boys, on the other hand, see themselves as different from their mothers and through increasing separation and autonomy from their mother they develop identification with their father. Boys are therefore socialised into isolated (separate) ways of being and model the aggressive and power seeking nature of adult males (Corey, 2005).

Vogelman, (1990) follows this school of thought when describing the family as the most significant institution in shaping the child's beliefs, attitudes and values, explaining that at a young age the child starts to adopt the attitudes and roles of its parents, especially sex role stereotypes. Whether or not they are aware of it, most parents act as representatives of their society and prevailing sex roles become embedded through childhood activities encouraged by parents. Boys are frequently taught to play with guns, play sports and engage in physical activity. Aggression, independence and physical strength are therefore fostered. On the other hand, girls are often taught to play with dolls, value cooking and cleaning tasks and to be reliant on others; nurturance, dependence and passivity are therefore fostered.

Koss and Harvey (1991) hypothesized that male aggression towards women is highly likely for young men reared in families where female family members were the targets of male aggression and when attitudes that bring down women are prevailed. Sexually assault behaviour in young men has been related to fathers' ideas of sexual aggression as well as father's sexual behaviours towards their wives (Walker, 2005).

'Gender is constructed or learned, from particular conditions, experiences and contingencies that a culture systematically, and differentially, pairs with human femaleness and maleness, and is a major social category used by most societies as a basis for socialisation and the assumption of social status' (Lott & Maluso, 1993, p.99).

Children learn at a very early age what it means to be a boy or a girl in our society. Through countless activities, opportunities and various forms of guidance, children experience the process of gender role socialisation. Gender roles are defined as those non-physiological components of sex that are regarded culturally as appropriate to males and females (Martin, Wood, & Little, 1990). As children develop, the gender stereotypes they are exposed to in their home context are reinforced by other elements in their environment and are thus perpetuated throughout childhood and on into adolescence (Martin, Wood, & Little, 1990). In Nigeria, traditionally a male dominated patriarchal society. Men are expected to hold the power while women are expected to passively stand back and are frequently exploited.

3. METHOD

This study made use of 100 participants which were randomly selected from Senior Secondary Class 3 Student of Government College, Keffi, Nigeria. The age of the participant range from 14 – 20 years. The study adopted the survey design. The instrument consists of structured questions which were developed by the researcher and the instrument consists of three sections. The first section consists of demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second section consists of questions describing various misconceptions about sexuality using a likert scale: SA – Strongly Agreed, D – Disagreed, A – Agreed, SD – Strongly Disagreed. The third section consists of questions assessing involvement in identified sexual behaviours, measured using the following scale: Always (3), Occasionally (2), Not at all (1)

The respondents are required to choose the option that best describes their perception towards the questions. The researcher personally designs the instrument and a pilot study was conducted where a small sample size was used to evaluate the item of the instrument. The survey was done to test the administration and scoring of the item. A cronbach method was used to check the reliability of the instrument using SPSS 17 statistical package which yielded 0.73.

3.1 Ethnical Consideration

To gain access to the student, the principal of the school was contacted and informed of the nature of the study. Once approval and permission was obtained from the principal, random males and females between the ages 14-20 were approached, and then invited to take part in the study; this was done with the assistance of key teachers in the school. The participant were then provided with an information sheet explaining the nature and purpose of the study and what was required of them as them, i.e. to complete an individual or group interview.

From here, these adolescents were able to approach the researcher on a voluntary basis according to their own free will to participate. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researcher. One is aware that inquiring about an individual's life is an invasion of their privacy, and each individual participant was notified that confidentiality was guaranteed at all times and that if any question posed to be too personal, they were free to withdraw from the study or not answer the question concerned. As this is a qualitative study and attention is being directed towards the experience and perceptions of these specific adolescents, therefore attention was not placed on the quantity of participants. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is not to generalize the findings to the entire population from which the subjects were drawn, but to decipher the relevance of this study to another population believed to be similar.

4. RESULTS

The data set from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS 17 and the results are presented in the Table below:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	67	67.0
Female	33	33.0
Religion		
Christian	61	61.0
Muslim	31	31.0
Age		
14-16years	37	37.0
17-19years	48	48.0
>20years	15	15.0

The result in Table 1 above shows that that 67% of the respondents are male while only about 33% of the respondents are female and 61% of the respondents were Christian while only about 31% of the respondents were Muslim. The result also shows that about 37% of the respondents were between the ages of 14-16years, 48% between the ages of 17-19years of age while only about 15% of the respondents are over 20years of age.

Test of Hypotheses

The hypotheses formulated were tested using Chi-square statistical tool with the use of SPSS 17 statistical package and the output results for each hypotheses are given below:

Hypothesis One

To test the significant relationship between high level of sex stereotypes and tendency to engage in risky sexual behaviour

Table 2: Chi-square Table

Chi-square value	Df	P-Value	Remark
24.097	1	0.001	Significant

The findings from the chi-square test above shows that respondent who reported high level of sex stereotypes showed the tendency to engage in risky sexual behaviour. Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 24.097$, $p < 0.05$) revealed that sex stereotypes significantly influenced the tendency of respondents to engage in risky sexual behaviour, since the p-value < 0.05 .

Hypothesis Two

To test the significant effect of age on adolescents' risky sexual behaviour

Table 3: Chi-square Table

Chi-square value	Df	P-Value	Remark
33.980	1	0.03	Significant

The results of the study from Table 3 above also showed that respondents' age had a significant influence on involvement in risky sexual behaviour. A chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 33.980$, $p < 0.05$) was obtained on the relationship between age and adolescent involvement in Risky sexual behaviour.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the study showed that there was an emerging pattern of sex stereotypes among adolescent students. A high percentage of adolescents who participated in the study reported strong agreement with such sex stereotypes as "Boys have greater need for sex than girls", "Sexual drives in human beings are not controllable", "Girls having sex for the first time cannot get pregnant", "Only promiscuous people get HIV/AIDS", "Decent people do not openly discuss sex", "A person who is sexually active before marriage, usually makes a good spouse", etc.

Findings from the study also showed that respondents who reported high level of sex stereotypes showed the tendency to engage in risky sexual behaviour. Chi-square value revealed that sex stereotypes significantly influenced the tendency of respondents to engage in risky sexual. The results of the study also showed that respondents' age had a significant influence on involvement in risky sexual behaviour.

An overwhelming majority of respondents who reported high level of stereotypes were male. On the other hand, a substantial percentage of respondents who reported moderate level of sex stereotypes were females, lending credence to the assumption that male adolescents were more likely to manifest higher level of sex stereotypes than their female counterparts.

The findings of the study shows that respondent who reported high level of sex stereotypes showed the tendency to engage in risky sexual behaviour and it also reported that respondents' age had a significant influence on involvement in risky sexual behaviour. Kimura (1985) suggests that it may be individual differences rather than gender differences that produce the majority of the variance in behaviours. She believes that male and female brains are organized differently, and the sex of the individual does affect the way in which the brain operates, but in a manner different than previously believed.

The recommendations made based on the findings of the study:

- As to information and education program, adolescents clearly have prepared sources of information for various aspects of sexual and reproductive health, so the existing school-based sexual education program needs to be strengthened to address all aspects of sexuality and reproductive health, including contraception and the results of unsafe sex. Also, efforts of the mass media need to be generated to ensure the dissemination of correct and appropriate information on sexual and reproductive health issues.
- There is need for more in-depth behavioural study, focusing on the perceptions and experiences of adolescents in different settings and among out-of-school adolescents; various training programs on reproductive health and sexuality particularly sexually transmitted infections for gender-appropriate adolescents should be developed and facilitated with sensitivity to the needs of youth.

- Parents have a considerable role to play so that their children lead healthy sexual and reproductive lives. Efforts need to be directed at parents on how to impart reproductive health and sexual education to their children.

6. CONCLUSION

The concept of sexual consent in adolescent relationships needs further attention. Further research on girls' perspectives and attitudes towards sexual relationships would also be helpful in order to understand the differences in opinions of sexual consent between sexes. It would also be helpful in bridging the gap between contrasting and conflicting understandings of sexual consent between genders and allow for safer sexual practices. The study concluded that there was a high prevalence of sex misinformation and sexual risk-taking among adolescents. There is need for virile and radical programmes of sexual re-conditioning to enable this population develop responsible sexual behaviour.

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QUESTIONNAIRE**Section A: Demographic Characteristics**

1. Gender: () Male () Female
2. Age: () 14-16 () 17-19 () above 20
3. Religion: () Christianity () Muslim

SECTION B**Question Items Describing Various Misconceptions about Sexuality**

Key: Please tick the appropriate box on each of the statements

Strongly Agreed (SA) Agree (A) Undecided (UN) Strongly Disagreed (SD) Disagree (D)

Items	Levels				
	SA	A	UN	SD	D
Boys have greater need for sex than girls?					
Sexual drives in human beings are not controllable?					
Girls having sex for the first time cannot get pregnant?					
Only promiscuous people get HIV/AIDS					
Decent people do not openly discuss sex					
A person who is sexually active before marriage, usually makes a good spouse					
Is it true that girls want to have sex because they wear mini-skirts?					
Girls are more open to sex than Boys					
Boys sexual drives are stronger than Girls					
Girls feels uncomfortable than Boys on issue of sex					
Boys dominate sexual violence					

SECTION C**Variables assessing involvement in identified sexual behaviours**

Key: Please tick the appropriate box on each of the statements

Always (AL) Occasionally (OC) Not at all (NE)

Items	Levels		
	AL	OC	NE
Are you involved in unprotected sexual intercourse?			
Are you involved in multiple sexual partners?			
Are you involved in casual sex?			
Do you think a boyfriend can rape his girlfriend?			
Are you involved in homosexuality?			