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AGE, GENDER, RELIGION AND PHYSICAL LOCATION AS PREDICTORS OF THE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS OF SOME NIGERIAN ADOLESCENTS DURING PUBERTY

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Abstract

The study investigated the influence of four demographic variables on the social interactions of 250 Nigerian adolescents during the period of puberty. The mean age of participants 14.75 years for females and 15.01 years for males. Using an ex-post facto research design, a pre-tested self-reporting scale (The Adolescent Social Interaction in Puberty Scale) was used to elicit data on the composite and relative contribution of identified demographic variables as influence on the social interactions of participants during puberty. Three research hypotheses were tested using Multiple Regression and the t-test statistical analysis. Findings indicated that demographic variables jointly influenced the social interactions of the adolescents sampled in the study, while the relative effects of variables showed that age of adolescent and their urban/ rural location significantly influenced social interactions during puberty. Social interaction was more pronounced towards a friend of the opposite sex and peers, with adolescents indicating little or no parental influence on their social interactions during puberty. Gender differentials were minimal ($t=1.29, p=0.05$) but age of adolescents ($t=2.06, p=0.05$) and their physical location greatly influenced social interactions during puberty ($t=2.9, p=0.05$). Implications of findings were highlighted.

Keywords: Adolescent, Social interactions, Puberty.

Introduction

The psychological and social adjustment of adolescents to pubertal development has been a long-standing research concern. Finding on such studies have helped to give a better understanding of adolescent behaviour (Brook-Gunn and Werner, 1989; Steinberg, 1992, Dorn, Susman and Ponrakis (2003). Developmentally, the life stage known as adolescence present a distinct stage of development marked by tremendous physical and psychological challenges and changes. As McCauley (2005) asserts the distinct behavioural adjustments evident in this life stage are

integral aspects of adolescent development particularly as the young person strives to accomplish significant developmental tasks within a context of tremendous change. Developmental tasks like becoming physically and sexually mature, acquiring skills necessary for the accomplishment of adult roles, gaining autonomy from parents (emotionally and physically), and establishing social ties with members of the same and opposite gender. (Steinberg 1996, McCauley 2005, Kipke 1999).

The accomplishment of this task is enabled by the acquisition of skills: cognitive, social and behavioural. As Kipke (1999) noted such skills are further developed through peer-oriented interactions, which are quite distinct from earlier child-adult patterns and parent-child relationships. This study investigates contextual issues relating to adolescent development in the period of puberty focusing on social interactions as a mark of the developmental task in adolescence. There is a powerful influence of the social context the adolescent is exposed to, on his/her development.

Puberty

Puberty is a stage in adolescent development and it signifies the biological changes and sexual maturity that are characteristic of the transition from childhood to young adulthood. It presents a physiologic phenomenon in the period of adolescence. The increase and impact of hormonal activities in the process of pubertal development has made the changes that occur in the transition from childhood into adolescence unique. The unidirectional models of "raging" hormones having far reaching effects on adolescent behaviour pervade many researches. Various scholars have hypothesized on the impact of hormones and pubertal changes on adolescent behaviour. Identified impacts of this developmental process on adolescents include body satisfaction (BDS) and adolescent self-concept (Folk, Pedersen and Cullasi, 1993); perception of body image (Tolma and Debold, 1994; Rosenbaum, 1993); and adolescent self-esteem (Simmon, Blyth, Van Cleave and Bush, 1979; Simmon and Blyth, 1987; Brooks-Gunn and Reiter, 1990). Pubertal changes have also been found to be indicative of profound behavioural maladjustments like moodiness and depression (Brooks-Gunn and Warren, 1989; Buchanan, Eccles and Becker, 1992; Cheng, 1996; Angold, Costello and Worthman, 1998). These biological changes interact with a variety of contextual, psychological social and environmental factors that in a reciprocal manner affect adolescent behaviour (Brooks-Gunn, Graber and Paikoff 1994). This reciprocal process presents a cyclical effect of physical maturation in puberty on other aspects of adolescent development from a contextual perspective. Physical maturity in puberty affects self-image and behaviour and subsequent changes in the behaviour of others. Likewise the changes occurring in adolescent appearance may elicit new behaviour from peers and parents, which in the cyclical process may prompt adolescent reaction in behaviour and self-image (Steinberg 1996)

Pubertal maturation is controlled by intricate and very complex interactions of the brain, the pituitary gland and the gonads, which in turn interact with the environment (Kipke 1999). Early adolescence is a critical phase in adolescent development as this presents all the phenomena of pubescence. Assessing pubertal development has been an area of research interest. Identified assessment tools include biomarkers, anatomical markers such as Tanner Scales and other physical biomarkers. As Rockett, Lynch and Buck (2004) noted secondary sexual characteristics (using Tanner scales) have been helpful in providing a relatively useful measure of the stage of pubertal development. Of the single indicators of development among girls the first menstruation (onset of the menarche) has been used extensively in research (Adegoke 2001). This can be explained by the fact that the first menstruation is a unique and concrete evidence of pubertal development and is considered a salient indicator of this stage of development among females (Adegoke 2001). A distinctive indicator of pubertal development is not as evident among boys, but as some researchers posit the first nocturnal emission (signifying the commencement of the spermarche) can be used as a comparable index of pubertal development as the menarche in girls (Gaddis and Brooks-Gunn 1985; Adegoke 1993). This study adopts the use of the first menstruation and nocturnal emission as the indicators of puberty among participants in the study.

Erikson's (1968) psychosocial explanations of adolescent development indicate the process of integration on the fifth stage of development as identity versus identity diffusion. This perception hinges on the reality that the maturational and social forces in adolescence are decisive in the developmental process at this age. Erikson hypothesized that the crisis experienced at this stage is resolved in the adolescent's interaction with others. Adolescent responses to the reactions of people that are considered as relevant and important as these provide the basis of selection and choice of elements of their adult identity. The social environment and context in which the adolescent tries to establish his/her identity brings to bear on the outcome of the identity formation and resolution process. Furthermore postulations attest to the fact that the physical and sexual changes have tremendous effects on the social and emotional development at the adolescent life stage (Elkins, McGue and Iacono 1997).

The ecological contexts of human development provide a more insightful analysis of developmental issues. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) postulation on the ecological contexts of human development lends weight to the controversies surrounding the universality and context-specificity in the study of issues relating to human development. Fuligni and Eccles (1993) succinctly noted that most researches on adolescent development have focused on either the micro-system

or the macro-system as settings for studying development at this period of life; with far less attention being paid to the meso-system and to the exo-system as settings within which the adolescent develops. The attempt is made by these researchers to focus on the meso-system of adolescent development- that is the system of relations between the immediate settings of the adolescent- in this case the family-peer relations in a period of tremendous developmental changes.

Demographic variables identified in this study are perceived as contextual indices of adolescent development and as having predictive contextual influences on adolescents during puberty. The variables identified herein are age, gender, religion and physical location. These are viewed as having predictive effects on the social interaction of the adolescents sampled in this study.

Studies have clearly indicated dimensions of gender differentials in the impact of pubertal development and adolescent adjustment. Rosenbaum (1993) was able to show the import of changing body image on female adolescents and the adolescent girl's efforts in the process of emerging into adulthood to integrate as Rosenbaum puts it, sexual and reproductive aspects of her maturing body into the changing psychic concept of her body. Girls have been found to be more vulnerable to problems with anatomy (Cheng, 1996), while higher hormone levels in boys have been related to greater moodiness in the form of anger and irritability and in girls anger and depression, particularly in early adolescence (Brooks-Gunn and Warren, 1989). Interactive effects of girls menarcheal status, dating and eating disorders have been highlighted by Simmon and Blyth (1987) who, in their research suggest that puberty may be a potential stressor having adverse psychological consequences for girls only when coupled with other changes requiring adjustment. These scholars assert that by itself puberty appears to have modest effects on girls' and boys' self-image. However, cross cultural studies show that body image and perception of it, depend greatly on gender differences than on cultural differences among adolescents who have different ethnic origins but live in the same country (Ferron, 1997).

The age the adolescent attains puberty indicates the tempo and pubertal timing and this has tremendous effects on adolescent behaviour. Caspi, Lynam, Moffitt and Silva (1993) indicate that early maturing girls are less outgoing and less popular than their pre-pubertal classmates. These scholars assert that early maturing girls search for social acceptance by seeking or are being sought by older companions (older boys more often), an incidence that steers them away from their academic pursuits into more adult-like activities which are most times socially undesirable activities like smoking, drinking and drug use.

Religion in this study is perceived as contextual variable that could have a predictive influence on adolescent behaviour and interactions. A large number of

adolescents belong to some religious group and most claim belief in a higher power or Being (Wilcox, Rostosky, Randall and Comer-Wright 2001) Within the African context cultural, religious beliefs and practices are intertwined. Religious gatherings, we assume, provides a ground for adolescent social interactions. Also religion as a demographic variable in this study is conceptualized within the framework of the assumption that the influence of religion on behaviour and as a social institution categorizes religion as a strong socializing force (Wallace and Williams 1997).

The physical location of the adolescent has been perceived as having effects on pubertal development. Choudhury, Sahu, Patel and Mohanty (2006) in their study concluded that there is the existence of considerable variations in the development of pubertal signs among adolescents in the rural community the study was conducted, when compared to urban girls. A study of secondary sex characteristics as an index of pubertal development showed that Nigerian female adolescent attained menarche onset at an earlier age (13.53 years) when compared with their Zimbabwean counterparts (14.24 years). The effects of these differentials can be explained on basis of the environmental, nutritional, socioeconomic prevalence and genetic factors.

The physical environment and location of the adolescent also represents the level of media and enlightenment the adolescent is exposed to. For example in urban settings where adolescents are exposed to internet connectivity, the internet has been used not only to maintain social relationships but also to create new ones (Mesch 2005). Hence it is the assumption in this study that the physical location of the adolescent can predict social relationships and interactions among adolescents.

Adolescent social interactions and relationships during puberty are an essential part of the achievement of a developmental task. The attainment of autonomy and emotional independence is vital for the identity formation of the merging young adult. Parent- child relationships undergo important transition in this stage of development. Changes include a decrease in time spent with parents and a significant shift from dependency to mature reciprocity (Larson and Richards 1991). Allen and Hauser (1996) for example posit that adolescents benefit from parental support that encourages autonomy yet ensures continued monitoring and emotional connectedness. Peer group influence is significant in adolescents' social development, as this provide a basis for adolescent self evaluation (Falaye 2001). Peer interaction provides the adolescent with crucial information necessary for self-evaluation and assessment. These interactions help the adolescent to compare with other mates his/her actions, attitudes, feelings and values (Falaye 2001) Social interactions in puberty implies the effective interactions and relationships established by the adolescent within his/her immediate social environment. It

implies the acquisition of social skills that ensure the social acceptance to peers, parents as well as self-acceptance evident in adolescent self-esteem and self-concept. The social environment and cultural context of adolescent development predict the quality of these social competencies.

This study investigated the predictive influence of demographic variables like age, gender, religion and physical environment (location) on the social interactions of a sample of Nigerian adolescents in puberty. The assumption of the present researchers is that social interactions can be measured in terms of adolescent relationships with peer, parents and intrapersonal reactions to pubertal changes.

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were stated and tested using the 0.05 probability level:

- (1) There will be no statistically significant joint and singular predictive influence of identified demographic variables of age, gender, religion and physical location on the social interactions of adolescents during puberty.
- (2) There will be no significant direction of social interactions of this Nigerian sample, during puberty.
- (3) There will be no statistically significant difference in the social interactions of younger/older, male/female Christian/Muslim, urban/rural, adolescents sampled in this study during puberty.

Methodology

Research Design

An ex-post facto survey design was adopted in this study. The physiological indications of puberty, the social and physical environment of participants as well as the psychological impact of this stage of adolescent development were not manipulated. These variables were investigated in their naturally occurring state. A total of 250 adolescents from various backgrounds, were randomly sampled from co-educational schools in an urban and rural environment in Oyo State in Southwestern Nigeria. Out of this number 122 were males, while 128 were females, with mean age of 15.01 years and 14.75 years respectively.

Participants:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics Of Participants

Age:	12 -15 (164)	65.6%
	16-19 (86)	34.4%
Sex:	Male (122)	48.8%
	Female (128)	51.2%
Religions:	Christianity (134)	53.6%
	Islam (116)	46.4%
Physical Environment (Location)	Urban (137)	54.8%
	Rural (113)	45.2%

Research Instrument

The instrument employed for this study was a scale developed by the researcher Adolescent Social Interactions in Puberty Scale, which comprises of two different rating scales. It was designed to assess adolescents' social interactions and physiological development in the period of puberty. Physiological development assessed were mainly the secondary sexual characteristics in adolescent development.

1) Social Interaction scale

Adolescent social interaction was measured using a 13 items scale. The respondents are to indicate their degree of agreement with each item by ticking one of the four point response scale of: Strongly Agree (4); Agree (3); Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1). These categories were scored assigning the values on 4,3,2,1 on responses. This sub scale measured the social adjustments of adolescents through their self reported ratings on: their interactions with parents, peers, friend of opposite sex, friend of the same sex as well as their social skills in terms of their self esteem, self confidence and general assessment of their interpersonal relations. Respondents reacted to items on the sub scale such as:

"I do things so as not to lose the respect of my friends"

"I like being the centre of attraction when I am with my friends"

"I am more comfortable in company of my friends and mates than with my parents" " *I prefer keeping just one friend of the same sex"*

"I prefer close friendship with a friend of the opposite sex".

Finally respondents were asked to tick one person who they would rather be most of the time: peers, parents, a friend of the opposite sex, a same sex friend. The reliability analysis of this first part of the Scale indicated a 0.60 reliability coefficient using the split half reliability analysis.

2) Physiological Development Sub-Scale

This second sub scale assessed adolescent the physiological changes particularly in terms of their secondary sexual characteristics. This sub-scale assessed adolescents' ratings on their acceptance of pubertal changes and their attitude towards their body and acceptance by others. Participants in the study reacted to statements that elicited their self-reporting responses also on a four-point response scale. Sample items on this sub-scale include:

"I really do not like the way I look, I look different from all my friend"

"I am worried about the pimples on my face"

"I felt proud the day I wore my first bra"

"The change in my voice can be embarrassing at times"

The subscale has 12 items with the reliability coefficient of 0.70. In its entirety the Adolescents' Social Interactions in Puberty Scale indicated a reliability coefficient of 0.74.

Procedure

In the secondary school setting in Nigeria, Junior Secondary School students are young persons usually in the period of early adolescent with range of age between 10-14 years, while those in the Senior Secondary School are within the 14-19-age bracket. For the purpose of this study, adolescents in both the JSS and SSS age ranges were used. The physiologic indicators of puberty in the primary characteristics were not assessed but only the secondary sex characteristics of participants were the indices of puberty measured in this study. Participation in the study was however based on the indication that respondents have just commenced their menarche and spermatarche in the last six months prior to the conduct of this study. Thus out of the five hundred and sixty questionnaires initially distributed only two hundred and fifty respondents could be adjudged as been in the pubertal stage of adolescent development. Schools used in the study to match the indices of urban school as well as a rural school environment. All schools used are public schools. Indications of an urban school setting include: easy access to school, transportation and mobility, availability of electricity, the exposure to the media and the indications of a metropolitan setting. The public schools on the outskirts of Ibadan the capital town of the state in which the study was conducted was used as rural school setting. Using a stratified random sampling technique; first, two local government area out of the ten local government areas in Ibadan were randomly selected using the ballot strategy. Secondly all secondary schools in local government areas were classified into urban and rural by the assistance of the local government authorities. Two schools were randomly picked

from the schools classified as schools in urban and those in rural settings using the fish bowl selection method. In the final selection Abadina College in Ibadan North local government area and Otun-Agbakin Community High School in Akinyele Local government of Ibadan Oyo state of Nigeria participated in the study. All the participants for the study were administered the research questionnaires. The investigators personally administered the questionnaires to the participants with the assistance of the school counsellors in the 2 schools. The research instruments were scored and the data obtained were analysed.

Data Analysis

Multiple regression and t-test statistical values were computed in order to test the hypotheses stated.

Results

To test the first hypothesis stated Tables 2 and 3 show the joint and relative predictive influences of the variables on the social interactions of adolescents during puberty. The regression analysis yielded a coefficient of multiple regression (R) of 0.462 and a multiple R – square (R^2) of 0.213. Indicating 213% contribution to the prediction of the joint influence of the identified variables to social interaction during puberty among this sample of Nigerians. The Table 2 indicates that analysis of variance for the multiple regression data produced an F-ratio of 13.229 significant at the .05 alpha level. To ascertain the relative contribution of independent variables to the prediction Table 3, indicate that the standardized regression coefficients (Beta) ranged from .4073 to .1432, and un-standardized regression coefficient (B) ranged from 0.412 to .979, standard error of estimate ranged from 0.059 to 0.404, and t-ratios ranged from 6.928 to 2.425. This reveals that two out of the identified demographic variables – age and location were significant predictors of social interactions in puberty.

Table 2: Regression analysis using the combination of factors as predictors of adolescent adjustment during pubertal development

Multiple R = 0.462
Multiple R – square = 0.213
Adjusted R-square = .197
Standard error of Estimate = 3.06

Analysis of Variance

Source of Variation	Df	Ss	Ms	F-ratio
Regression	5	617.44428	123.48886	13.229*
Residual	244	2277.59972	9.33443	
Total	249			

*Significant at 0.05 alpha level

Table 3: Significance of Relative Contribution of Predictive Factors on Adolescent Adjustment

Variable	B	SEB	Beta	T-ratio	Sign. T.	Remark
Gender	-.113	.399	.017	-.283	.7771	N.S.
Religion	.194	.401	.028	.484	.6287	N.S.
Age	-1.014	.411	.142	-2.461	.0145	Sig.*
Physical location	-.979	.404	.143	-2.425	.0161	Sig.*
Constant	23.759	2.017		11.782	.0000	Sig.

*Significant at 0.05 alpha level

The second hypothesis sought to know the direction of social interaction (that is, with a friend of the opposite sex, peers, parents or a friend of the same sex) was also tested by regression analysis. Further analysis to show the direction of social interaction among Nigerian adolescents indicated two major direction of social interaction of adolescents sampled in the study; friend of the opposite sex and peers, were significantly strong assessments of the social interactions of these adolescents (t-ratio 8.422 and 3.812 respectively). Parents and a friend of the same sex did not present significant indices of social interaction of adolescents in this study (See Table 4)

Table 4: Direction of social interactions of adolescent during pubertal development

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T	Sig	Remark
	B	SE	Beta			
Constant	6.754	1.316		5.131	.0000	S*
Friend of opposite sex	.856	.102	.471	8.422	.0000	S*
Peers	.381	.102	.215	3.812	.000	S*
Parents	-5.22	.098	-.030	-.531	.596	NS
A friend of same sex	.182	.148	.070	-.531	.219	NS

*Significant at 0.05 alpha level

The t-test analysis of difference was used test the third and fourth hypotheses that sought to find the difference in the social interaction of urban and rural, male and female adolescents during puberty. Table 5 shows that there is a statistically significant difference in the social adjustment of urban and rural, male and female, Christian and Muslim, early and late adolescents during pubertal development.

Table 5: Differences in the Social Interaction of Adolescents.

Variables	N	Mean	SD	df	t	P
Age 12 – 15	164	33.60	3.90			
Age 16 – 19	86	32.66	2.1	248	2.06	.042*
Male	122	33.00	3.18			
Female	128	33.53	3.61	248	1.29	.199
Christian	134	33.38	3.62			
Muslim	116	33.14	3.16	248	.56	.576
Urban	137	33.84	4.28			
Rural	113	32.58	1.64	248	2.9	.003*

* Significant 0.05 alpha level.

Discussion

Results from this investigation revealed that the four demographic variables compositely predict the social interactions of Nigerian adolescent during the period of pubertal development. The relativity of the contributions of these variables to the prediction of the social interaction of adolescents during puberty indicate that only the age of the adolescent and their physical location significantly predict their social interaction in this stage of development. The contextual issue in the development these finding support other researches on parent-child and adolescents' peer orientation (Fuligni and Eccles 1993). The linkages among the different contexts in which the adolescent develops is also indicative of the ecology of adolescent development in the pubertal period (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1989). The focus of the present study, on the meso-system (family peer link) in the development of the adolescents sampled in this study lends weight to the susceptibility of peer influence on adolescence. The influence of peer pressure in adolescence is confirmed in this study supporting assertions that children become somewhat less oriented towards their parents and more oriented towards their peers with a sharp escalation in peer pressure in this period of development (Steinberg 1996, Rosenthal and Feldman 1991, Feldman and Quatman 1988). This social interaction pattern in adolescences is indicative of the development of a sense of autonomy and identity formation that is characteristic of adolescent development. The findings

here in lend credence to postulations that maturational and environmental indices bear significant effects on the adolescent's social interactions and social adjustment. (Elkins et al 1997).

The direction of social interaction among the adolescents in this study not only reveals a significant interaction with peers but also with a friend of the opposite gender. The importance of ultimate friendship with the opposite sex is also confirmed among this Nigerian sample. The highly statistically significant direction of social interaction with the opposite sex is not only indicative of the fact that the participants in this study have gone through the transitional period between same-sex (non sexual) relationships and opposite-sex (sexual) ones. (Steinberg, 1996). The fact that the statistical significance in the direction of social interaction is evident towards a friend of the opposite sex and peers confirms Connolly and Johnson's (1993) assertion that intimate relationship between adolescents of same sex continues and does not necessarily replace this intimacy between an adolescent male and female. The statistically significant influence of age on these social interactions could also indicate that the sample used in the study were not in their preadolescence stage of development as gender, in previous studies, has been found to be a single most important determinant of friendship in the preadolescent stage (Schofield 1981).

The context of the physical location of the adolescents in this study, reveal a strong prediction on the direction of the social interaction among these adolescents urban adolescents present a higher mean score ($X = 33.84$, $SD = 4.28$, $t = 2.9$) than that rural counterparts. The indication herein is that the exposure and amenities enjoyed in urban settings of electricity; internet access, media exposures and so on) could influence social interactions of adolescents. Urban adolescents are more exposed to face-to-face and online social relationships (Mesch 2005).

The non-significant influence of gender of the adolescent on their social interaction, in this study does not confirm findings on the links in gender differential and pubertal developmental issues (Rosenbaum 1993, Cheng 1996, Ferron 1997). The maturational processes of puberty have significant effects on adolescent self perception, self concept and wants.

The temp and timing of puberty also have been shown to have different effects on male and female adolescents by researchers (Rosenbaum 1993, Richards and Larson 1993, Cheng 1996).

Religion was found to have no influence on adolescents' social interactions in puberty. This confirms assertions that religion though perceived as a social institution and socializing force expected to have a mediating effect on behaviour, has little or no significant effects on adolescent sex behaviours and interactions.

In their study (Falaye and Falaye 2003) found that religion or the affiliation to a religion had little or no significant effect on adolescent sex behaviours).

Implications and Recommendations

This study has to a large extent confirms issues that pertain to contextual issues in adolescent development. The non-significant direction in parent-adolescent interactions present the need for adequate programmes on proactive parenting style in parent-adolescent relationship. Parenting styles that allow the autonomy of adolescent but matched with monitoring and authoritative (democratic) parenting approaches will enhance parent-adolescent relationship at this period of development. It is important that a package service and programme involving counseling, social work and social welfare experts be developed for parents having problems with their adolescents. Parent – adolescent counseling services should be an essential part of the professional service offered for the teaching of proactive parenting strategies in the country.

The tint of sexuality that surround adolescent opposite sex interaction must not be ignored. Intimacy, the need for friends, and confidants as well as peer pressures are important issues in the social development of the adolescent. With friends and peers readily available to give guidance and information particularly in areas of sex and reproductive health matters, it becomes imperative that adolescent sex counseling becomes an aspect of professional counseling service that is offered in schools and other youth for a in the country.

These issues again bring to the fore the matter of the full professionalization of counselling as a helping profession and service in Nigeria.

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