

*Social Distress Among Students of Enugu State College of Education:  
Influence of Psychological Abuse and Demographic Variables*  
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## **SOCIAL DISTRESS AMONG STUDENTS OF ENUGU STATE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION: INFLUENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The present study explored the predictive role of psychological abuse and demographic variables on social distress among students in Enugu State College of Education (Technical). Two hundred and sixty (261) students with age ranging from 17 to 31 years, mean of 22.59 years and SD of 3.19 were surveyed. The participants comprise of 106 (40.6%) males and 155 (59.4%) females. Two standardized measures such as Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SADS) and NorVold Abuse Questionnaire were utilized. To arrive at an objective finding, two hypotheses were tested using independent subject t-test and multiple regressions. Results indicated that students with high level of psychological abuse reported more social distress than students with low level of psychological distress [ $t(259) = 7.49, P < 0.05$ ]. However, age, gender and level of study jointly predicted social distress  $F(3, 257) = 2.04; p < 0.05$ . In line with the findings, implications revolved around the need for educationists to get it right by preventing or managing social distress among students by making conscious efforts to ensure that all things required are put in place to guard against the development of psychological abuse while the study recommended that university counsellors can help distressed students to enhance their social functioning through basic life skills training.*

**Keywords: Social distress, level of study, age, gender, psychological abuse, students**



## Introduction

Considering research highlighting the variety of negative educational and life outcomes associated with mental health problems, universal school-based screening has been proposed as an essential first step towards identifying the mental health needs of students (Bradley et al., 2008). For the sole fact that youths constitute the largest number of citizens in Nigeria, the need to sample their level of social distress becomes paramount. The concept of distress originated from stress, which is the body's response to changing stimuli or stressors; linked to the cause of several health issues. But stress is not all bad because stress can actually be a good thing as long as it's not causing a negative effect. In fact, Hans Selye explained stress in two ways: distress and eustress. Distress, being the stress that negatively affects one can lead to some form of mental disorder; and eustress as the stress that positively affects an individual. Social distress is defined as experiencing distress, discomfort, fear, anxiety in communal positions and deliberately avoidance of entering public situations and generally as a fear of negative evaluation by others (Watson & Friend, 1969).

With respect to etymology of social distress, there are many factors that can cause a student to feel distress. This includes academic pressure, finance, relationship matters and so on. Knowing that distress is one of the main determinants of health status (Backé et al., 2012) there is need for an adequate investigation of social distress levels not

only in public health research but also in the educational sector. This is because the school environment may be an essential source of social distress.

Another variable to consider that may have a predictive influence on social distress is psychological abuse. Prior studies have classified the psychologically abusive behaviours that may occur in group settings into 26 strategies (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015), including isolation from family, manipulation of information, control of affective relationships, control over activities and time use, intimidation and threats, manipulation of guilt, denigration of critical thinking, and imposition of an absolute authority. Evidence shows that psychological abuse has been reported by former members of religious, political, philosophical, pseudo-therapeutic, personal development, and pyramid scheme groups, among others (Coates, 2010). The recovery process of survivors of psychological abuse and the way they cope with trauma can be very diverse, as is also the case for victims of other forms of interpersonal violence. Most survivors describe having gone through a difficult period of readjustment to society outside the group (e.g. Coates, 2010). In their own words, they describe feeling like 'Martians' (Boeri, 2002, p. 338), feeling 'out of place' (Coates, 2010, p. 306), or even perceiving the out-group society as 'a strange and scary new world' (Matthews & Salazar, 2014, p. 198).

Further, in understanding, social distress, exploring demographic variables became

necessary. This led the research to incorporating demographic variables. Studies also point to a higher prevalence of this social distress disorder among females (Kendall, 2016; Matthews & Salazar, 2014). To most college students especially women this is a time of many societal expectations both socially and intellectually. Interestingly, in other studies we also read that high socio-economic factors have a protective effect on body dissatisfaction in women (Dinsa et al., 2012). To this end, the researcher assessed the influence of psychological abuse and demographic variables as predictors of social distress among students in Enugu State College of Education (Technical).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In contemporary times, students face enormous pressures ranging from social, emotional, academics etc. up to deciding on a career path, which undoubtedly gives rise to distress. Social distress is not only a form of mental distress but may debilitate students physically and emotionally. Beyond detrimentally factors in physical wellbeing, social distress is also associated with impairment in career competence and certainty (Daniels et al., 2006). While experiencing social distress, people may avoid social events and may withdraw into their own “shell”. In such a situation, the individual may be depressed and may indulge in some debilitating attitudes and addictive behaviours such as gambling, Internet addiction, and other behavioural

addictions which may have both short and long term disastrous effect on the individual and their immediate environment by extension. As a student, such a condition will extend and distort their academic life which may lead to truancy, poor social school life, fear of negative evaluation by others, low self-esteem, and poor academic performance.

On the other hand, regarding the negative outcomes of psychological abuse, evidence shows that survivors may experience psychological and social difficulties (Saldaña et al., 2018), psychopathological symptoms (Goldberg et al., 2017), and impairment in general well-being (Saldaña et al., 2021), even many years after they have left the place they were abused (Aronoff et al., 2000). Psychosocial difficulties frequently reported by survivors include feelings of loss, anger, guilt, low self-esteem, decision-making difficulties, and social skill deficits; while psychopathological symptoms usually found in this population include depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and dissociation (Göransson & Holmqvist, 2018; Saldaña et al., 2021). The dominance of such emotions is often observed in patients with increased levels of depression symptoms (Sarigiani et al., 2020). To the best knowledge of the researcher, no study has investigated the role of psychological abuse and demographic variables on social distress among young people. Therefore, this



study will assess the influence of psychological abuse and demographic variables as predictors of social distress among an students of Enugu State College of Education (Tecchnical), Enugu, Nigeria. In view of this, the general objective of this study is to examine psychological abuse and demographic variables as contributing variables of social distress among university students. The specific objectives are:

- a. To investigate the influence of psychological abuse on social distress among students.
- b. To examine demographic variables (age, gender and level of study) influence on social distress among university students.

### Literature Review

Literature underlying the mind or cognitive process which strategically explains social distress serves as the construct encapsulating the key study variables of this study including social distress, psychological abuse and demographic variables. Sabbagh (2004) delineates two component processes of the cognitive process: (1) detecting or decoding others' mental states based on observation and available information and (2) reasoning about those mental states in the process of explaining or predicting others' actions. Decoding abilities refer to basic skills, such as identifying facial expressions or following eye gaze, whereas reasoning abilities require higher-order skills such as detecting sarcasm or inferring that someone is upset because they did poorly

on an activity (Sabbagh, 2004). People with cognitive deficits have difficulty evaluating others' thoughts, and thereby experience social impairment that may contribute to functional impairment seen in autism and schizophrenia Baron-Cohen (2005) as cited in Sabbagh (2004). Females are generally known to be more sensitive and emotional than males and the ability to use the cognitive abilities can be affected by age or the level/stage in which an individual has attained in life.

The observational domain of the theory connotes that individuals determine their own behaviour while being influenced by the environmental factors after processing what they have observed mentally. For example, youth who believe that hurting others or who grew up in an abusive environment may tend to repeat such circle all over (Bandura 1986). If we observed these sorts of things then we will be more likely to try out these behaviors as well which could lead to psychological abuse. Likewise, it is possible that if individuals have trouble identifying and reasoning about others' emotions and intentions, they may experience social distress when in social situations which is possible among young people with regards to the interaction they have with their peers and other individuals they come in contact on a day to day basis. This is akin to the Demand-Control Model which is essentially based on the two most popular models in distress research: The demand-control model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist et al., 2004). The demand-

control model assumes “a high risk of psychological strain and physical illness”, when “psychological demands” are high and “decision latitude (control)” is low (Karasek & Theorell, 1990, p. 32). Other reviews points to the relationship between psychological abuse, demographic variables and social distress. For instance, Antelo *et al.* (2021) while recruiting 794 participants examined the mediating role of social functioning and resilience in the relationship between psychological abuse experienced in the past while in a group and current psychosocial distress and psychopathological symptoms. Results indicates that victims of group psychological abuse reported lower levels of social functioning and resilience than non-victims, and higher levels of psychosocial difficulties and psychopathological symptoms. Sex and age joining the group were included as covariates. Participants who had experienced higher levels of group psychological abuse tend to have poorer social functioning, which is related to lower resilience. In turn, lower levels of social functioning and resilience are related with higher distress.

Kimhi *et al.* (2020) investigate the extent to which individual resilience, well-being and demographic variables predicts distress symptoms and perceived danger by 605 respondents through an internet company and another 741 respondents through social media. Results showed significant negative correlations between individual/community resilience and

sense of danger and distress symptoms. Also, significant positive correlations were found between gender, community size, economic difficulties and sense of danger respectively. Gender and economic difficulties also positively correlated with distress symptoms.

Oboegbulem (1995) observed that irrespective of gender, qualification and experience, the teachers were dissatisfied with their conditions of service. The result also agrees with that of Taylor (2000) as cited in Check and Okwo (2012) that initially women have the same response to stress as men. The findings contradicted that of Ngoka (2000) that female teachers found the events dealing with student’s misbehavior greater sources of strength than their male colleagues, and that with respect to qualification and experience, university graduate teachers reported less stress than their non-graduate colleagues, and that with respect to experience more experienced teachers reported less stress than their less experienced colleagues.

Check and Okwo (2012) investigated the influence of demographic variables on stress perceptions of teachers of secondary schools by examining factors causing stress and the influence of gender, qualification, experience cultural background, school location and size on stress perceptions of teachers. Previous studies have found that the demographics such as age, gender, and family income have predicted distress and resilience, primarily in the context of security



threats (Eshel & Kimhi, 2016; Marciano et al., 2019). The findings of this study are also consistent with previous studies that examined demographic characteristics as predictors of resilience and stress: age (Masten, 2002), gender (Kimhi & Eshel, 2016), community size (Koziara et al., 2019), and economic status (Martini, 2020). In this respect, it seems that the demographic predictors of different threats are similar beyond the specific type of threat.

Akpunne and Akinnawo (2017) examined domestic violence influence on psychological distress among 300 remand adolescents of correctional facilities in Lagos. Findings revealed a significant positive correlation between domestic violence and the level of psychopathology while gender has significant influence on anti-social behaviour. Females reported higher mean scores than their male counterparts in vandalism, theft, truancy, disruptive behaviour, general anti-social behaviour and psychological distress.

### Hypotheses

1. Students with high level of psychological abuse will report more social distress than students with low level of psychological abuse; and.
2. Demographic variables such as age, gender and level of study will jointly predict social distress among students.

### Methodology

**Research Design:** The researchers employed a cross-sectional survey design in exploring the role of psychological abuse and demographic variables on social distress.

**Study Area:** The present study was conducted at Enugu State College of Education (Technical) campus in Enugu metropolis, Enugu State, Nigeria.

**Study Population:** Population of this study was students of the College. Further, the inclusion criteria were that participants must be students of Enugu State College of Education (Technical).

**Sample and Sampling Techniques:** The researchers conducted the study by employing purposive sampling technique in enrolling the participants. Participants of this study consist of two hundred and sixty-one (261) students obtained from various Departments of the institution. Out of the 261, 106 (40.6%) were males while 155 (59.4%) were females. Participants' ages were between 17 and 31 years with mean age of 22.59 years and standard deviation of 3.19. The level of study revealed that Year 1 students were 31 (11.9%), Year 2 students were 103 (39.5%), Year 3 students were 66 (25.3%), Year 4 students were 55 (21.1%) and Year 5/Extra Year students were 6 (2.3%).

### Instruments for Data Collection

Two standardized instruments were employed in this study, and they are: Social Avoidance and Distress Scale and

the NorVold Abuse Questionnaire (NorAQ) apart from the demographic variables:

**Social Distress:** To measure social distress the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SADS) as revalidated by Razian *et al.* (2017) was utilized. SADS consists of 28 items to measure social distress and isolation. Participants were made to choose between true and false choices. Key aspects of social anxiety are measured: such as distress, discomfort, fear, anxiety – and the avoidance of social situations. The respondents' scores in SADS was accounted as one point for each of the subsequent sections if evaluated "true" (2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26) and one point for each of the successive sections if evaluated "false" (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, 15, 17, 19, 22, 25, 27, 28). The SADS instrument has been valued at high reliability with its internal consistency at .94 and the test-retest reliability ranging of .68 (Watson & Friend, 1969). However, in the present study, the Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was 0.93 which implies a very high internal consistency.

**Psychological Abuse:** In order to assess psychological abuse, the NorVold Abuse Questionnaire (NorAQ) developed by Swahnberg and Wijma (2003) was employed. The 13 statements concerning the experiences of abuse is divided into three kinds of abuse; emotional, physical,

sexual abuse in the health care system. The scale is made up 4-point scoring format: 1 = No, 2 = Yes, as a child (<18 years), 3 = Yes, as an adult ( $\geq 18$  years) and 4 = Yes, as a child and as an adult. The Cronbach's coefficient of the study was 0.81 indicating a high internal consistency.

**Demographic variables:** This was assessed under the demographic section of the questionnaire in a nominal dimension. They include age, gender and level of study.

#### **Method of Data Analysis**

The descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency and standard deviation was utilized in analyzing the demographic variables in the study. While on the other hand, inferential statistics such as multiple regressions and independent t-test was employed in testing the study hypotheses.

**Ethical Considerations:** Ethical approval was obtained from the Enugu State College of Education Research and Ethics Committee.

#### **Results**

**Hypothesis One:** Students with high level of psychological abuse will report more social distress than students with low level of psychological abuse. This was tested using t-test for independent samples and summary of results presented in Table 1.



**Table 1:** T-test summary table showing differences in social distress between students with high psychological abuse and students with low psychological abuse.

Variable		N	Mean	Std.	Df	t	P
Psychological Abuse	High	144	72.00	18.68	259	7.49	<0.05
	Low	117	55.46	16.93			

Results presented in Table 1 show that students with high psychological abuse was significantly different from students with low psychological abuse on social distress [t (259) = 7.49, P <0.05]. This significant difference was due to the mean scores between students high in psychological abuse (72.00) and students low in psychological abuse (55.46). That is, students with high psychological abuse reported more social distress than

students with low psychological abuse; hence, the first hypothesis was confirmed.

**Hypothesis Two:** Demographic variables such as age, gender and level of study will jointly predict social distress among students. This was tested using multiple regressions and summary of results is presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2:** Multiple regression summary showing relative contributions of age, gender and level of study on social distress among students.

Demographics	B	T	Sig	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P
Age	.07	1.09	<0.05	0.152	0.023	2.04	<0.05
Gender	-.01	-.05	>0.05				
Level of Study	-.16	-2.46	<0.05				

**Note:** N = 261; AR<sup>2</sup> = 0.012; \*Significant at the 0.05 level

The results presented in Table 2 shows that demographic variables (age, gender and level of study) had a coefficient of multiple correlation (R) of 0.152 and multiple correlation square (R<sup>2</sup>) of 0.023. This shows that 2.3% of the variance in social distress was explained by the combined effects of demographic variables. Table 2 also indicates that age was an independent contributor of social distress ( $\beta = .07$ ; t = 1.10; p<0.05). In addition, level of study indicated a significant prediction of social distress ( $\beta$

= -.16; t = -2.46; p<0.05); while gender independently showed a non-significant prediction of social distress ( $\beta = -.01$ ; t = -.05; p>0.05). Furthermore, Table 2 revealed a significant joint prediction of social distress as a result of the impact of demographic variables F (3, 257) = 2.04; p<0.05.

**Discussion**

The focus of this study was to explore the role of psychological abuse and demographic variables as predictors of



social distress among students of Enugu State College of Education (Technical) in Enugu State. The first hypothesis which states that students with high level of psychological abuse will report more social distress than students with low level of psychological abuse was confirmed. This finding is in consonance with the findings of Antelo *et al.* (2021) who revealed that victims of group psychological abuse reported lower levels of social functioning and resilience than non-victims, and higher levels of psychosocial difficulties and psychopathological symptoms as well as higher distress. The finding of this study is invariably showing that psychological abuse is a key variable in understanding social distress. In other words, the more the psychological abuse, the more the social distress experienced by students. An explanation can be gleaned from the fact that man is naturally engineered to move towards pleasure and avoid pain. That being the case, whenever, an individual especially young people find themselves in an abusive situation, naturally they tend to avoid such and in so doing, their anxiety levels cum their level of social distress may increase.

The second hypothesis which states that demographic variables such as age, gender and level of study of respondents will jointly predict social distress was also accepted. What this connotes is that demographic variables such as age and level of study which showed independent contributing effect on social distress are important factors when addressing issues

pertaining to social distress. This finding is in line with the study of Waswa (2018) whose results showed that both male and female respondents had issues with distress. However, gender was not a significant independent predictor of social distress; this sub-finding was not in consonance with the study of Kimhi *et al.* (2020) whose results showed significant positive correlations between gender, community size, economic difficulties and sense of danger respectively on distress symptoms. To give a practical or experiential explanation of this finding may be a bit difficult. However, one may deduce that a possible explanation of age is that the growth process can make an individual have a change of perspective or the way of reacting to a stimulus in the environment - hence, could be a reason for the significance of age on social distress. Secondly, the level of study being independently significant can be explained by the cognitive perception of students believing that they are now senior colleagues to younger or lower level students. Another explanation is the issue of adaptability of the stress and pressure which can make some students to acclimatize with the social and psychological expectations in the university environment. Thirdly, with the fact that the gap in gender role in our contemporary society have been closing up consistently, one may build on that to see why male and female may experience social distress similarly, particularly for the fact that they are both students and almost experiencing the same academic workload and pressure.



### Policy Implications

The implication of this study is that for educationists to get it right, they have to start by preventing or treating social distress problems among students and making deliberate and conscious efforts to see that all necessary and required mechanisms are put in place to shield against the development of negative body image and to engage prevalence of psychological abuse among undergraduates. Emphatically, psychological abuse is paramount in determining the level of social distress among students. Another factor that should be of relevance to educationist and policy makers in the educational sector is the level of study or the educational developmental stage of every student. This is because, every student if not everyone is battling with identity issues and the growth they experience in the university gives them some sense of self-worth that can serve as a buffer against social distress.

### Limitations of the Study

The study encountered the following limitations:

1. The relatively small sample size and the risk of selection bias due to the lack of randomization might have restricted the capacity to generalize our findings among participants.
2. The study was also limited by its cross-sectional descriptive survey design because causality cannot be ascertained whether distressed

students rightly evaluated their experience of psychological abuse or not. More so, some of the participants felt reluctant to attempt the questions in the questionnaires.

### Suggestions for Further Studies

In line with limitations stated above, the researchers suggest that:

1. Future studies should also implement longitudinal designs and snowball sampling in a student population as this in order to examine alternative paths between key study variables.
2. Also, future research should employ interventional mechanisms to examine how students with low psychological abuse can be assisted and administered some form of intervention so that the benefits of social wellbeing can be realized among students.

### Recommendations

After considering the study findings, the following recommendations were proffered:

- i. Counsellors could help distressed undergraduates to improve their social functioning through basic life skills training,
- ii. Furthermore, support groups with other victims of psychological abuse may help express and process their traumatic experience and improve their social skills without fear of being judged or misunderstood either by their peers, lecturers, parents or any significant 'others' in their life.

- iii. Lastly, family social support and encouragement can be helpful to properly redirect these behavioural problems aright.

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