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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RISKY BEHAVIOUR, LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN OSUN STATE

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Abstract

The study examined gender differences in risky behaviour, learned helplessness and school connectedness among students of Redeemer's University and Obafemi Awolowo University, Osun State, Nigeria. The study was conducted using quantitative method, which is the use of questionnaires to collect data. The Beck's Hopelessness Scale, Risky Behaviour Scale and Measurement of School Connectedness (MOSC) questionnaire were administered to participants. The participants were selected using purposive sampling and consisted of 278 university students studying at Redeemer's University and Obafemi Awolowo University, Osun state Nigeria. Independent sample t test and Pearson Product Moment Correlation, were used to analyzed the data. The result of this study indicated that there was a significant difference between male and female on risky behaviour. There was no significant difference between male and female on learned helplessness. In addition, no significant difference was found between male and female on school connectedness. Finally, there was no relationship between learned helplessness and school connectedness. Implications for educators and further research are discussed.

***Keywords*:** Gender, risky behaviour, learned helplessness, student, school connectedness.

Introduction and Statement of problem

Over the years, the society has raised heightened concerns over the falling standards of education manifested by poor academic performance, poor attitude to education, low level of confidence and motivation to face rigorous academic challenge, graduates who fail to communicate effectively orally and otherwise, among others. Adolescents spend a greater time within the four walls of a school than in any other context and reports from several studies suggests that school connectedness during adolescence promotes long-term positive emotional and academic outcomes including higher academic performance (Anderman, 2002; Anderman & Freeman, 2004), as well as fewer behavioural problems and school completion (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Karcher, 2002; Bond, Butler, Thomas, Catlin, Glover, Bones & Patton, 2007). Failure to understand and adequately address these issues bears grave consequences educationally and economically for the future of the society at large.

The researchers work in a private higher institution where they have observed, over the years, apathy towards academic and low educational involvement among students. This

ignited interest in this research work. This study seeks to provide insight to gender differences in school connectedness and learned helplessness among undergraduate students.

According to Bernat and Resnick (2006), connectedness refers to protective relationships that exist between adolescents and their environment. This covers relationships adolescents have with individuals within and outside their family, as well as relationships within their broader social context, including schools and other institutions (Allen, McElhaney, Kuperminc, & Jodl, 2004; Resnick, 2008). These relationships serve as anchoring points in the lives of young people representing the opposite of social isolation and disconnection, which is considered a threat equal to that of substance use and violent behaviours (Putnam, Feldstein, & Cohen, 2003; Osterman, 2000). Connectedness is a student's sense of bonding or belonging to school, of liking school and sharing in its values (Austin, Hanson & Voight, 2013). Research has revealed that it is a powerful factor in promoting student motivation, attendance, performance, and graduation. (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Loukas, Suzuki & Horton, 2006; Austin, O'Malley, & Izu, 2011; Blum 2005; Libbey, 2004; McNeely, National Research Council, 2004).

By high school, studies suggest that a large number of adolescents are disconnected from school, indicating dislike for their teachers and loss of interest for school-work generally (Klem & Connell, 2004; Loukas, Ripperger-Suhler & Horton, 2009). Research shows that student's perceptions of their school's climate - feelings and attitudes that are elicited by a school's environment - affect their academic motivation and achievement as well as influence student behavioural and emotional problems (Loukas, 2007). Unlike behavioural problems, which tend to be external and observable, emotional problems are more difficult to identify because of their internal nature, but include anxiety, sadness, loneliness, hopelessness, and worthlessness (Anderman, 2002; Loukas, Ripperger-Suhler & Horton, 2009).

One of the mechanisms that may explain how school climate affects individual outcomes is school connectedness. School connectedness can be regarded as a protective factor that improve adolescent and youth outcomes by addressing specific health risk behaviours, such as alcohol and drug use, violence, delinquency, and early sexual initiation (Watson, Battistich, and Solomon, 2000; Lonczak, Abbot, Hawkins, Kosterman & Catalano, 2002). Consequently, there is a great need to increase and maintain high quality levels of school connectedness, helping to promote long-term positive development. It is important that both students and adults are committed to learning and are involved in school activities.

School connectedness consists of two primary components which are: (a) attachment – close and effective relationships with those at school; and (b) commitment – investment in school. These factors enables students have a "stake" in the norms and values of the school.

School and classroom characteristics that are shown to favour school connectedness include among others:
(a) high academic standards with strong teacher support
(b) a mutually positive and respectful relationship between teacher-student and other adults
(c) a safe physical and emotional school environment
(d) opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities
(e) tolerant disciplinary policies
(f) degree to which students, teachers, and staff contribute to decision-making at the school.

Students who are engaged in their own education exhibit behavioural traits such as persistence, effort, sustained attention to tasks, and a higher level of preference for challenge and mastery. School connectedness and learned helplessness are related and influence each other. These two concepts demonstrate that if a student lacks control over an aspect of their school environment in one situation this may impair learning in similar situations. They both, also, work in the spectrum of intrinsic motivation showing a student's inability to engage his or her interest and exercise one's capacities.

Learned helplessness results from experiencing uncontrollable events that cause individuals to expect future lack of control; it is also the belief that one's behaviour does not influence what happens next, that is, one's behaviour does not control future outcomes or results. Students who experience repeated school failure are particularly prone to develop learned helpless reply style. Because of repeated academic failure, these students begin to doubt their own abilities, leading them to doubt that they can do anything to overcome their school difficult Stipek (1993). For example, when a student believes that he or she is in charge of the outcome, she may think, "If I study hard for this test, I'll get a good grade." On the contrary, a learned helpless student thinks, "No matter how hard I study for this test, I'll always get a bad grade.

Learned helplessness is characterized by decreased motivation, failure to learn, poor grades, underachievement, behaviour difficulties and negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and frustration. Students with learned helplessness have bad approach towards learning, which are indifferent or depressed, disconnected, show wrong behaviour in the classroom, and have lower achievement. Some students miss class for no just course and some behave nonchalant during lectures as if they are powerless to influence the outcomes of their learning (Seligman, 1995). These students may give up trying to gain respect through their academic performance so they turn to other means for recognition and respect – becoming the class clown, bully or tease or engaging in antisocial behaviours (Berger, 1983). Learned helpless students are likely to experience low school connectedness because they believe that they don't relate to the school environment.

Social control theory by Hirschi (1969) states that connectedness to organizations promotes behaviour conformity, which can reduce the probability of high-risk behaviour. The research in this area shows that students connection to and affiliation with schools (educational connectedness) has a positive influence on learned helplessness. Bernat & Resnick (2009) states that attachment (bonding) is a central component of social control theory. Hirschi's theory postulates that bonding within a socialization unit, such as school or family, consists of four elements: (1) involvement in the unit by typical social behaviours, (2) attachment or affective relationships to other individuals in the unit, (3) investment or commitment to the unit by following rules, and (4) belief in the values of the unit. Once a bond is established, it will likely affect future behaviour. When one of these four items break down, Hirschi hypothesizes that an individual may then participate in deviant/ criminal activities. In this study, for example, if a student ceases to engage in typical social behaviour (attending classes regularly or participating in extra-curricular activities) or have contact with other individuals (lecturers, other adults or fellow students), or loses faith in the values of the school (becomes disenchanted due to the system of punishment or administration of the school), he/she may become disconnected from the school and easily prone to learned helplessness. Thus school connectedness is a protective against the tendency of students to learned helplessness within the system. A significant number of studies pertaining to social control theory include measures of the role of school attachment and school support in the lives of young people.

The learned helplessness model was first described in the 1960s by Overmier and Seligman (1967), and Seligman and Maier (1967). Their studies reported that dogs which experienced inescapable electric shock demonstrated significant motivational, learning, and emotional deficits and failed to initiate behaviors to terminate the shock. These low expectancies appeared to produce motivational, affective, and behavioral deficits similar to depression observed in humans. Seligman suggested that these deficits were a consequence of the animals learning that their behaviour had no impact on the outcome of whether or not they received a shock. After experience with uncontrollable outcomes, they appeared to develop low expectancies for exerting control over later outcomes which could be controlled.

Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) revised the learned helplessness theory as it applied to people, by proposing a reformulated helplessness theory, placing an emphasis on individual causal interpretation (attribution) of uncontrollable events - that is, when individuals encounter an uncontrollable aversive event, they ask themselves why. The answer people give to this question determines the parameters for the helplessness that ensues. In this revised model, it is assumed that attributions are the primary determinants of an individual's actions and affect. It is an explanation of human problems that presupposes that people are rational, acting "logically" in accordance with their interpretation of the causes of events. When confronted by circumstances, individuals attempt to explain why the circumstances have occurred and these explanations determine how they will respond to events.

According to Abramson et al. (1978), the cause may be attributed either to the person or to the situation; as either transient or persistent across time; and the cause may be perceived to have an impact on a variety of outcomes or may be limited just to that particular event. According to the revised model, when an individual perceives negative events as beyond their control, the expectation of future uncontrollability is likely to occur. The expectation of future uncontrollability is thought to be sufficient to produce most of the symptoms of depression, including a lowered rate of activity, cognitive deficits such as impaired learning, emotional responses of sadness and anxiety.
This study is guided by the following objectives:
1) To identify the level of gender difference in respect to risky behaviour.
2) To examine gender difference on learned helplessness
3) To identify the difference between male and female on school connectedness
4) To examine the relationship between learned helplessness and school connectedness

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited from students of Redeemer's University, Ede, and Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. A total of three hundred students from both universities were recruited to participate in this study. These students were selected from all levels, that is from 100 - 400 level. The age range of the students is between 18 -30 years.

Research design

This research adopted a survey research design with the use of questionnaire, which was used to quantify gender difference on risky behaviour, learned helplessness and school connectedness. Data was collected through the use of questionnaire.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was divided into five sections. The first consist of the socio-demographic background of the respondents. Section two measures level of learned helplessness using the Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS) (Quinless & Nelson, 1988). The LHS is a 20-item, 4-point Likert scale strongly indicative of learned helplessness. When evaluating the original LHS, correlations were determined with Beck's Hopelessness Scale (r = 0.252), Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (r = -0.622), and alpha reliability = 0.85.

Section three and four measure risk-taking behaviours – smoking and level of drinking. Finally, section five measures the school connectedness of respondents using the Measurement of School Connectedness (MOSC) questionnaire (Sugar, 2012). These scales were selected based on their validity and reliability demonstrated through published psychometric values, the brevity of each instrument, and relevance to the phenomenon of interest. All the instruments were standardized form of questionnaire was used to measure learned.

Sample and sampling technique

The sample size was three hundred (300) students of Redeemer's University and Obafemi Awolowo University. This sample size was chosen from the Colleges and faculties from both Universities. In Redeemer's University, 150 questionnaires were administered and a total of 130 questionnaires were returned. In Obafemi Awolowo University, 150 questionnaires were administered. However, a total of 147 questionnaires were returned. In summary, a total of 300 questionnaires were administered in the course of the study and 278 questionnaires were completed and returned. This gives a response rate of 92.7%. The study adopted a purposive sampling technique.

Method of Data Analysis

The techniques used in analyzing these data were inferential and descriptive statistics. For the descriptive statistics, Standard Deviation, Mean and Frequency Tables were used to summarize the participant's scores for gender, risky behaviour, learned helplessness and school connectedness. For inferential statistics, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SSPS) was used to analyze the data collected. Independent T-Test and Pearson Product Moment Correlations techniques were put to use where applicable in order to test the objective of the study. The difference between the mean scores was analyzed using the independent t-test and the relationship between the variables in this study was found using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation.

Results

The results from this study measure gender differences on risky behaviour, learned helplessness and school connectedness among undergraduate students of Redeemer's University and Obafemi Awolowo University. The data were analyzed through the use of Independent Sample Test and Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Independent t-test was employed to determine gender difference in respect to risky behaviour, learned helplessness and school connectedness, while Pearson Product Moment was employed to determine the relationship between learned helplessness and school connectedness.

Descriptive statistics of demographic variables

Table 1 shows that most of the students who participated in this study are between 18-21 years old.

Table 1: Percentage distribution of Respondents by age of the respondents

Age	Frequency Distribution	Percentages
14-17 years	19	6.9
18-21 years	188	68.1
22-25 years	57	20.7
26-30 years	12	4.3
Total	276	100.0

Table 2 shows the male who participated in this study are 47.6% (131) while female are52.4% (144) Most of the participants who participated in the study are females.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of respondents by gender

Gender	Frequency distribution	Percentages
Male	131	47.6
Female	144	52.4
Total	275	100.0

Table 3 shows the level of class of the respondents in both universities and it is indicated that majority of the participants in this study are in 400 Level.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of respondents by respondents' level of study

Respondents' Level	Frequency Distribution	Percentage
100	38	13.1
200	55	19.8
300	61	21.9
400	102	36.7
500	21	7.6
600	1	0.4
Total	278	100.0

In **t**able 4, 52.9% of the participants in this study are students of Redeemer's University.

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of respondents by respondents' institution

Name of respondents' school	Frequency Distribution	Percentage
OAU	131	47.1
RUN	147	52.9
Total	278	100.0

From table 5, the average mean and standard deviation for learned helplessness are 57.24 and 9.90; for school connectedness are 24.55 and 12.06; for risky behaviour are 38.79 and 6.05.

Table 5: Prevalence of learned helplessness, risky behaviour and school connectedness

S/N	Variable	Frequency	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Learned helplessness	247	24	91	57.24	9.90
2	School connectedness	215	0	68	24.55	12.06
3	Risky behaviour	64	22	52	38.79	6.05

Inferential statistics

Table 6 shows the t-test analysis of gender on risk taking behaviour and the results indicate that there is a significant difference between male and female on risk taking behaviour (t= 3.29, df = 62, *P*<0.05). That is, male respondents show higher level of risk taking behaviour than female respondents. Male respondents engage more in drinking alcohol and smoking than female respondents in Redeemer's University and Obafemi Awolowo University students.

Table 6: Independent t-test of gender difference on risk taking behaviour

Gender	N	Mean	S.D	df	t	*P*
Male	38	40.71	5.22	62	3.29	<0.05
Female	26	36.00	6.18			

Table 7 depicts the t-test analysis of gender on learned helplessness and the results indicate that there is no significant difference between male and female on learned helplessness (t= 0.73, df = 240, *P*>0.05). However, male respondents show higher level of learned helplessness than female respondents.

Table 7: Independent t-test of gender difference on learned helplessness

Gender	N	Mean	S.D	df	t	*P*
Male	115	57.72	9.58	240	0.73	>0.05
Female	127	56.77	10.29			

Table 8 indicates the t-test analysis of gender on school connectedness and the results indicate that there is no significant difference between male and female on school connectedness (t= 0.94, df = 209, *P*>0.05). However, male respondents show higher level of school connectedness than female respondents.

Table 8: Independent t-test of gender difference on school connectedness

Gender	N	Mean	S.D	df	T	*P*
Male	107	25.30	11.00	209	0.94	>0.05
Female	104	23.74	13.06			

In table 9, there is no significant relationship between learned helplessness and school connectedness (r = 0.39; P>0.05). That is, school connectedness is not associated with learned helplessness among undergraduate students. Furthermore, it means that the fact that a person is learned helpless does not have anything to do with either a person is not connected to school.

Table 9: Relationship between learned helplessness and school connectedness

Variable	N	R	P
Learned helplessness	243	0.39	> 0.50
School connectedness	232		

Discussion

This study examines gender differences on risky behaviour, learned helplessness and school connectedness. In effect the four objectives were examined. The first objective shows a statistical significant gender difference on risky behaviour among undergraduate students of Redeemer's University and Obafemi Awolowo University. It was indicated that male respondents have higher level of risk taking behaviour that their female counterparts. It means male students engage more in smoking and drinking than female respondents. This is consistent with the work done by Fatoye and Morakinyo (2002) on secondary school students use of drugs, alcohol and cigarettes. They reported that males used alcohol, cigarette, kolanut, coffee and other substances more than their female counterpart. The use of these substances was regarded as a common lifestyles for most of these males. The use of cigarettes and cannabis was completely reserve for males. However, they also found that females abused the inhalants and the tranquillizers more than the males.

The second objective examines if there is a significant difference between male and female in respect to learned helplessness. The finding shows that there is no significant difference between male and female on learned helplessness. That is, gender is not a determinant of one's level of learned helplessness. This is in agreement with these studies that examine gender difference on learned helpless among male and female and found that both gender in the 21st century give up easily when face with challenging tasks (Ellis, 2003; Jose and Bellamy 2012). However, the results in another study clearly found that boys showed more helpless behaviour, as assessed by the teacher, than did girls (Harald, 2010).

The third objective which indicates that there is a significant gender difference on school connectedness was found not to have significant difference. That is, the gender of the students does not determine their level of school connectedness. Male students can be more connected to school than female students and vice versa. However, some studies provide contrary findings to this study. For example, Voelkl (1997), indicate that girls tend to report better school connectedness than boys. However, other research suggests that this trend changes over time, with girls reporting greater school attachment than boys in middle school and boys reporting greater attachment and connectedness than girls in high school (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Thaden, 2006; McNeely et al., 2002). Also, Shochet, I. M., Dadds, M. R., Ham, D., & Montague, R. (2006) found that lower connectedness was associated with anxiety in adolescent girls, but not in boys, and Faulkner (2009)'s study on Canadian adolescents, found that such associations were seen with poorer self-reported health in girls, but not in boys. In addition, girls generally reported greater levels of school connectedness than boys (Ma,

2003). This was confirmed in a paper by Nichols (2008), with mostly Hispanic adolescents in an American school.

The final objective states that there is a relationship between school connectedness and learned helplessness. The result shows no significant relation between school connectedness and learned helplessness. That is, school connectedness is not associated with learned helplessness among undergraduate students. Furthermore, it means that the fact that a person is learned helpless does not have anything to do with either a person is connected or not connected to school. You can be connected to school and still be learned helpless and you may not be connected to school and have self-efficacy.

In conclusion, gender is a very significant determinants regarding risky behaviours (Smoking and drinking of alcohol) among undergraduate students. However, in respect to learned helplessness and school connectedness, gender does not have any significant difference. In addition, the level of students' connectedness to school is not associated with learned helplessness.

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