

Personality Dimension to Cultism in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: A Sociobiological Perspective

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ABSTRACT This paper sought to generate a better understanding of the dimension of sociobiology relevant to personality development. Specifically, the paper explored how sociobiology can be used to explain personality vis-à-vis cult membership. The paper addressed such questions as: Does nature alone account for personality? or is it nurture alone?; or a combination of the two? The paper reviewed relevant theories of personality, and examined the influence of nature and nurture on personality development and secret cult membership in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The paper concludes that an individual's personality is the product both of inherited traits and tendencies. Inherited genes influence behaviour, however, the environment (i.e the culture in which we are raised, our early conditioning, the norms among our family, friends, social groups, and other influences that we experience) is factor that exert pressures on our personality formation that may influence participation in cultic activities.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most important problem facing tertiary institutions in Nigeria today, is how to handle the menace and aggressiveness of cult members. Never before has the potential for the destruction of lives and property on campuses been so great or escalated so fast and horrible as now.

Unfortunately, our understanding of cultic menace and aggression on the various campuses is sparse and the predisposing factors to cult membership especially the influence of biology (heredity and genes) on the personality involved even sparser. The only few exceptions to this are the works of Elegbeleye (1997), and Fawole (1997). These two cases are even limited in scope and theory.

The objective of this paper is to explore and to add to the existing academic debate, juxtaposing heredity and environment in an exhaustive specification of causal factors to assess the relative contributions of genetics and environment in the causation of human characteristics (personality) and behaviour.

The theory underpinning this paper is taken from the works of sociobiologists. *Sociobiology* is an academic discipline, based upon the tenet that all animal and human behaviour is ultimately dependent upon genetic encoding moulded through evolutionary history by the processes of selection. Wilson (1975), Dawkin (1976) provided the first definition of the new sub-discipline as "the systematic study of the

biological basis of all social behaviour. Our discussion also involves the influence of social environment on human behaviour. Thus this paper contributes to the *nature* versus *nurture* debate of human personality and behaviour.

Personality, refers to the characteristics of an individual or of people in general that provide consistent patterns of behaviour in response to situation. Generally, the notion of personality is invoked in the attempt to predict or explain individual behaviour, and refers to what an individual brings to a situation that belongs to them. Secret cult, is defined by Ogunbameru (1997) as any form of organisation whose activities are not only exclusively kept away from the knowledge of others but such activities are carried out at odd hours of the day, and they often clash with the accepted norms and values of everyday life. Some of the features generally associated with secret cults are exclusivity of membership; the use of signs, passwords, and similar materials; group objectives and shared experience of rituals and beliefs.

PERSONALITY THEORIES

There exist variants of personality theories, with none widely considered as 'right'. However, well-known approaches to personality theory are: (i) the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, (ii) the trait theory of Gordon Allport, (iii) the person-centered, or humanistic theory of Carl Rogers, and (iv) the cognitive theory of George Kelly.

The Psychoanalytic Theory of Freud

To date, the *Freudian theory* of personality has been the most widely used in the detailed examination of an individual's personality. This is grounded in a general theory of personality, which delineates a tripartite personality structure of id, ego, and superego. The theory submits that the individual's personality is determined by his or her success in progressing through the different stages of psycho-sexual development during the first five years of life.

According to Freud, the *id* (the most basic system of the personality) is the first to develop in the child. It contains the inherited portion of the mind and includes instincts. It is an "infantile" personality orientation directed only towards pleasure. The *ego* can distinguish between what exists only in the subjective mind and what exists in objective reality. The *superego* represents the values and traditions of society typically taught children by their parents.

The id may be thought of as the biological component of personality, the ego as the psychological component, and the superego as the social component. In Freud's view, the id, ego, and superego are in constant conflict. For instance, when the ego feels pressure it adjusts by means of a series of defense mechanisms, thus protecting the conscious from the unconscious. The four defense mechanisms are:

1. *Regression*. Regression forces the concern from the conscious mind or forces deliberate forgetfulness. Problems cannot be solved this way, hence regression simply postpones them and does not aid personality development.
2. *Rationalisation*. The ego finds excuses or explains away the problem. This is not conducive to problem solution, or personality development either.
3. *Reaction Formation*. The ego regresses an uncomfortable problem and substitutes its opposite.
4. *Projection and introjection*. Ego uses projection when a person denies that he or she has a particular emotion or acts in a particular way and "blames" it on someone or something else. In introjection, the person "takes in" something from outside, makes it his or her own, and sees it as part of himself or herself. In sociology, this process is called *internalisation*.

The Trait Theory of Allport

The *trait theory* – seeks to identify the key personality traits, and to examine the association of these traits and behaviour. Allport (1937), unlike Freud, believed that the conscious determinants of behaviour are the most important. Thus the traits of an individual provide the best explanation of that person's motivated response to situation.

The Person – Centered or Humanistic Theory of Rogers

The *humanistic theory* submits that every person is capable of healthy, well-adjusted behaviour, and only inappropriate personality training, social pressures, or other circumstances produce mentally unhealthy or unpleasant people. Therefore, an individual is best understood as an organized whole whose basic tendency in life is to strive for self-actualisation.

The Cognitive Theory of Kelly

Cognitive theory focuses upon the links between mental processes and social behaviour. Cognitive theories at a general level are opposed to behaviourism and suggest that human beings are active in selecting stimuli, constructing meanings, and making sense of their worlds.

PERSONALITY DETERMINANTS

The discussion that follows is based on the biological and social bases of human behaviour.

The Biological Basis of Human Behaviour

An early argument in personality research was whether an individual's personality was the result of heredity or environment. That is, was the personality predetermined at birth, or was it the result of the individual's interaction with his or her environment? Therefore, the simple question to which an answer is required here is—"what determines personality"? This question has no single answer because different variables contribute to personality. There are however, four basic influences that can lead to personality formation: heredity, group membership, role, and situation.

The Influence of Heredity

Heredity theorist suggest that individuals are

born with differing capabilities or abilities; and human behaviour is influenced by the physiology and biology of the body. For instance, man inherits certain characteristics that influence his ability to perform certain acts, as well as a lot of mental abilities.

Although the idea of biologically transmitted similarities is an old one, the idea as to the means of this transmission and its malleability by environmental influences have changed. The contemporary ideas are grounded in research on genetics (a term first carried in 1905 for the science of heredity) has its origins in Mendel's classic studies of cross-breeding Peas (Marshall, 1996: 213).

Gene is the fundamental unit of biological inheritance, and the underlying genetic structure of sexually reproducing species that combines in complex ways with a wide variety of environmental influences to produce individual outward appearance. *Chromosomes*, the nuclei of the body-cells of humans carry the genes, the basic units of material inheritance in man.

Galton (1869), while exploring the role of heredity in accounting for individual differences in personality and intelligence introduced the term eugenics in his explanation. *Eugenics* refers to the manipulation of the processes of evolutionary selection, in order to improve a particular genetic stock.

Heredity determines body type, sex, characteristics of the muscular and nervous systems. For example, people may inherit varying potentials for reaction times, and tolerances for frustration. Characteristics like these influence an individual's needs and expectations. All these may affect an individual's participation or non-participation in cultic activities. For instance, a physically weak youth (or a frustrated student) is occasionally driven to achieve feats of physical strength as a form of over compensation. Physical stature, gender, temperament, muscle composition and reflexes, energy level, and biological rhythms are characteristics generally considered to be either completely or substantially influenced by who your parents were: that is, by their biological, physiological, and inherent psychological make-up. An individual may therefore join a secret cult if membership of cults run through the family. The heredity approach argues that the ultimate explanation of an individual's personality is the molecular structure of the genes, located in the

chromosomes.

Another issue to address is – how does gene affect behaviour? The relationship of observable behaviour, the phenotype, to the understanding genetic structure, the genotype, is highly complex. The action of genes depends on the environment and the experience necessary for the genes to be exhibited in the phenotype. It should be noted however that although the environment does not directly alter the genes, it can and does affect their expression in observable behaviour. Behaviour *per se*, is not inherited; whatever is it that is genetically transmitted is somehow coded into the chemistry of the individual genes. This genetic encoding influences behaviour in such a way that different genotypes, exposed to identical environments, turn out differently.

The habitability concept refers to the extent to which differences in behaviour can be related to underlying differences in genes. These comments are similar to the roles of nature and nurture, that is heredity and environment, in the development of human behaviour. Gene differences underlie variations in a diverse array of behaviours – activity levels, avoidance, conditioning rates, aggressiveness and dominance, and many other behaviour dimension (Wiggins et al., 1976: 22).

The basic factors in heredity, the genes, are constructed from a spiral molecule of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), and genes can act by controlling the synthesis of proteins. Also what is inherited is a predisposition that biases behaviour development. The two common forms of predisposition are: *differential susceptibility* or the interaction of the genotype with its environment; and the *selective exposure*, or the correlation of genotype with its experience.

Simply stated, differential susceptibility means that the effect of experience depends in part on the genotype to which the experience occurs. On the other hand, in selective exposure, the genotype will, in part, determine the nature of experience to which the individual is exposed. The tendency for an individual who inherits the genes that may influence membership of a secret cult is determined by an enabling environment. Most behaviours of interest to personality study involve a combination of the two processes. An example is the association between muscular physique and delinquent behaviour. About twice as many delinquents possess muscular physiques

(Wiggins et al., p. 31). This is due to different factors. First, muscular strength, athletic prowess, and physical stamina are relatively direct consequences of gene action. Second, possession of these attributes, at least in certain subcultures will lead to a history of selective reinforcement for delinquent acts. Thus the ultimate association between constitution and behaviour is a direct result of gene action and an indirect consequence of the selective exposure and differential reinforcement history of the delinquent behaviour. This joint influence of the genotype on developing behaviour may be called the "looking-glass" theorem: Differences in physique and behavioural predispositions (arising as relatively direct results of gene differences) create the stimulus for differential social learning, which tends to selectively reinforce the initial predispositions. For instance, during the recruitment exercise into cult, a lot of factors are taken into consideration. One of such factors is the physical stature of a potential member. A member has to be well built in order to be able to withstand the rigors of initiation rites. He or she also needs to be strongly built to partake in physical exercises whenever, the need arises.

THE SOCIAL BASIS OF HUMAN PERSONALITY

The central assertion of the social viewpoint is that personality can be fully understood only by considering the social context in which the person lives and develops. Unlike the biological viewpoint that focuses on heredity and genes, the social viewpoint focuses on the interplay of the following: culture, roles, models, group membership, and the situation.

The Influence of Culture

The most pervasive influence on personality is the culture in which the person lives. Specific areas of concern from the social point of view include models, roles, and cultures.

Models. Several aspects of the observer, which influence the probability of imitating another person have been studied. People who are low in self-esteem, people who are incompetent at a particular task, and people who are emotionally aroused and uncertain all tend to watch others closely and follow their actions.

Thus students join secret cult simply by imitating those other members they assume to be models.

There is also the aspect of model-rewards and punishment. One of the most important features appears to be the perceived consequences of the model's behaviour – whether or not it leads to awards or punishment.

The major argument of modeling is that one primary way individuals learn to be as they are is by imitating models. A child can willingly or unwillingly imitate his parents aggressive behaviour. *Aggression* is an act of hostility, violence, or extreme self-assertion. Most sociological theories of aggression root it not in the biological substructure or psychological superstructure of the individual, but in his or her relationship to the social environment. The most popular of this is the *frustration – aggression* hypothesis, which states that aggressive behaviour results when purposeful activity is interrupted. The frustration – aggression hypothesis has been identified with the earlier work of Freud, who argued that frustration – the blocking of pleasure – seeking or pain – avoiding activities always leads to aggression, either towards the perceived source of interference, or (if inhibited) displaced on to another object. Thus some students join secret cult in order to fight both real and imaginary enemies they think are "blocking" their ways. For example, a lecturer victimizing them, or a peer dating their girl friends.

Another group of theories – *learning theories*, view violence as the result of *successful socialization* and *social control*. That is, aggressive behaviour in general and violent behaviour in particular occurs when they are expected, even in the absence of frustration. For example, members of a subculture may learn to behave in accordance with norms of violence, which have been presented to them as socially desirable. Examples are situations when cult members unleash terror on university campuses, for no other reasons – than to announce their presence.

Exchange Theory

Another view associated with human behaviour and action is the exchange proposition. Homans, G. (1974), in his behavioural exchange theory argues that social structures could be analysed as a series of exchanges between individuals, exchanging material and non-

material goods according – to five interrelated propositional statements.

Success Proposition. For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action is rewarded, more likely the person is to perform that action.

Stimulus Proposition. If in the past the occurrence of a particular stimuli has been the occasion on which a person's action has been rewarded, then the more similar the present stimuli are to the past ones.

Value Proposition. The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action.

Deprivation – Satisfaction. The more often in the recent past a person has received a particular reward, the less valuable any further unity of that reward becomes for him.

Aggression – Approval Proposition. When a person's action does not receive the reward he expected, or receives punishment he did not expect, he will become angry, he becomes more likely to perform aggressive behaviour, and the results of such behaviour becomes more valuable to him.

Differential Association

Differential association is a theory of crime and delinquency pioneered by Edwin Sutherland in 1930s. According to Sutherland, criminal behaviour was learned by individuals being in contact with situations where criminality was defined favourably. The theory makes the explanation of crime largely a matter of ordinary learning process, rather than biological predisposition.

Differential Opportunity Structure

Differential opportunity structure is a theory of delinquency developed by Cloward, R.A. and L.B. Ohlin (1960) to link Mertonian theory of anomie to cultural transmission and differential association, in order to produce a general theory of delinquent subcultures linked to differential opportunities for crime. Cloward and Ohlin elucidated further the pathways to success in American culture. When such pathways are blocked, other opportunity structures may be found, and these could lead to diverse patterns of deviance.

In this characterization, a combination of

anomie theory and cultural transmission theory (subcultures) three major delinquent opportunity structures can be identified: criminal, retreatist, and conflict. The core idea of subcultural theory is of the formation of subcultures as a collective solution to, or resolution of, problems arising from the blocked aspirations of members, of their ambiguous position in the wider society.

Faced with a lack of legitimate opportunities, status could only be achieved within a subculture of opposition, expressing, hedonistic, and non-utilitarian values. Cloward and Ohlin combined elements of the anomie approach with Sutherland's theory of differential association, identifying "strain" as a result of the perceived blocking of legitimate means to attain internalized goals. Some youths usually resolve this strain by turning to the illegitimate opportunity structures of the subculture.

Influence of Group Membership

A group or social group refers to a number of individuals, defined by formal or informal criteria of memberships, who share a feeling of unity or are bound together in relatively stable patterns of interaction. Anthropologists working in different cultures have demonstrated the important role culture plays in personality formation. Individuals within any given culture according to them are exposed to existing values. Individual's membership in a group also exposes them to a social environment. An individual's personality is therefore molded by personal contact with other members of the group and by the individual's perceptions of the group as a whole.

The Influence of Roles

Role, highlights the social expectations attached to particular statuses or social positions attached to particular statuses or social positions and analyses the workings of such expectations. Culture defines how the different roles necessary to stay in the group are to be performed. Role influences are a special kind of group membership influence on personality development.

The Role of Situation

Situational influences are unique factors that

influence individual personalities. Situational determinants also include things that happen in the immediate family. Factors such as a divorce, an occupation that keeps a parent away from home much of the time may affect individual personality development.

THE INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENT ON CULT MEMBERSHIP

Sociological sciences have a common aim of developing theories that apply to social behaviour in general, whether human or non-human. The general principle of these theories is that behaviour throughout the life cycle of an organism emerges according to an evolved programme, but a programme that needs releasers or stimuli from the environment for its completion.

A proper understanding of the influence of environment on personalities involved in cultic activities may well begin by providing an answer to the question – “What in Nigeria constitutes the environment?” The environment in Nigeria as elsewhere, can be said to include other organisms whose main stress is *communication mechanisms* that make interaction possible. The environmental factors to be considered as relevant are: societal decadence, the family influence, foreign influence, subculture, and socialization.

THE ROLE OF SOCIETAL DECADENCE

Ogunbameru (1997:4) submits that the Nigerian society has today willingly or unwillingly provided an enabling environment for all forms of crises and crimes among which is the problem of campus secret cults. Oloruntimehin (1984); Abati (1994); and Okeowo (1994) link this to the general state of anomie or normlessness existing in Nigeria. These authors have argued that the Nigerian society has replaced honour with dishonour as a standard attitude. Vanity has become a popular commodity. Those who get involved in various forms of criminal behaviour have accepted the societal goal of success but since the opportunity to achieve the goal by legitimate or institutional means is not easily accessible to all, they yield to the urge to achieve the goal by the use of illegitimate means.

This is why we have in all the campus cults today children of the rich or wealthy and children of the poor in the society. Children from the wealthy background may be said to be suffering from what Giddens (1972) calls *anomie of the advantaged* and those from the poor background suffer from the *anomie of injustice*.

Perhaps it is appropriate to fully explain the meaning and relationship between anomie of the advantaged, anomie of injustice and cult membership.

In a well-regulated society, the collective conscience assigns each individual in a place within society commensurate his merit, and to each position a just reward. However, at certain times such a balance of justice does not hold sway. According to Durkheim (1952: 251, 1964: 375-378) the hereditary nature of property and thus life-chances often makes it difficult for merit to find its appropriate level within society. When this occurs, as presently is the case in the Nigerian society, some individuals enter into a conflict so as to change the opportunity structure. This more often results into the experience of anomie of injustice.

The anomie of injustice refers to a situation in which there are realistic aspirations. (in terms of merit) faced with inequitable opportunities. Put in another way, it involves a distinction between high aspirations and limited opportunities. Since social origins usually facilitate or hamper access to the forms of success represented by wealth or recognition or power, children from the disadvantaged background tend more often to join secret cults to use cults to obtain forcefully what they are denied in reality.

The anomie of the advantaged is concerned with unrealistic and unlimited aspirations. This form of anomie is common with the children of the rich, and high class members of the society. Among the children of the advantaged, there is generally a thirst for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations all of which they believe they can forcefully obtain through secret cult membership.

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) combined elements of the anomie approach with Sutherland's theory of differential association, identifying 'strain' as a result of the perceived blocking of legitimate means to attain internalized goals. Some youths, especially student cults may have therefore solved this

strain by turning to the illegitimate opportunity structures of the subculture.

The Collapse of the Family Institution

The collapse of the family institution is a contributing factor predisposing students to join secret cults. Many children no longer have parents they can look up to for inspiration. The existing family only set standards that encourage disorientation. For instance, some secret cult members are from family backgrounds of cult. Such students have grown up with the awareness that their parents have a special room, which no one else is permitted to enter. These rooms are usually filled with all sorts of emblems and effigies, which nobody can touch. More often, these parents are also discovered to go out at night, oftentimes to attend meetings that are never discussed at home. Some students who are either socialized to such situations or through imitation end up being cult members in tertiary institutions.

The *Daily Times* of Nigeria, of March 22, 1994 wrote in its Editorial, inter alia – the reign of secret cults and their mind – rendering activities are a manifestation of decay in modern day families. Due to the fervid race for material aggrandizement, parents have abandoned their traditional moral responsibilities. This has consequently brought about scant concern for proper upbringing of the child by their parents, who in share escapism, transfer this burden to the child's school teachers".

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

Foreign influence is another environmental factor known to influence membership of secret cults. Foreign influence is demonstrated in horror films like: "*First Order*", "*Demon Lovers*", "*In the name of God*", "*The House on Skull Hill*", among others, which show scenes of bizarre cult violence and esoteric practices that go a long way to influence the activities of cult members on campuses.

The Editorial comment of *The Daily Times* of March 22, 1994 commented on how cultism is further fuelled by the unwholesome foreign influences of violent culture which serve as role models for our youth. This is associated with the unchecked flourish of pop movies, deficient in instructive aesthetics, but redolent in violence

and moral stupor, have combined with other factors to breed new generation of degenerate and decadent Nigerians.

There are also some home video films influencing campus cult membership in Nigeria. A very good example is "*The RITUALS*" which is currently proscribed.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the influence of nature and nurture on personality and secret cult membership in Nigerian tertiary institutions, and concludes that an individual's personality is the product both of inherited traits, or tendencies, and experiences. These experiences occur within the framework of the individual's biological, physical and social environment, all of which are modified by the culture and immediate group ties.

Based on the thrust of sociobiology, the paper argues that the ultimate association between constitution and behaviour is a direct result of gene action and an indirect consequence of the selective exposure of differential reinforcement history of the delinquent individual. Though the behaviour of an organism throughout his or her life cycle is determined by an evolved programme, the programme needs some releasers or stimuli from the environment for its completion.

It can therefore be concluded that though behaviour is influenced by inherited genes, the culture in which we are raised, our early conditioning, the norms among our family, friends, social groups, and other influences that we experience are factors that exert pressures on our personality formation that may invariably influence participation in cultic activities.

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