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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN WISDOM AND SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING OF NIGERIAN CATHOLIC PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS

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Abstract

Despite the burgeoning number of empirical investigations of wisdom and spiritual well-being in recent times, there has been scant attention on these two constructs within the African society. Although wisdom and spiritual well-being are important for everyone, a group of people that are assumed to have high levels of such positive attributes are the religious leaders such as the ministers in the Christian faith. However, whether there are gender effects on wisdom and spiritual well-being of the clergy remains unknown. We examined gender differences in wisdom and spiritual well-being among priests and religious in Nigeria. Participants were 107 Catholic clergy (men = 31, women = 76), aged 21 to 69 years with a mean age of 47.45 years ($SD = 8.45$) who completed an online survey consisting of the Brief Self-assessed Wisdom Scale (BSAWS) and the Spiritual Well-being Scale (SWS). Data was analyzed using independent samples t -test. Results showed that there were no significant gender differences in wisdom between men ($M = 43.16$, $SD = 8.73$) and women ($M = 42.96$, $SD = 8.51$), $t(107) = .11$, $p = .912$. Similarly, men ($M = 74.64$, $SD = 11.50$) did not differ from women ($M = 71.43$, $SD = 11.47$) in spiritual well-being, $t(107) = 1.23$, $p = .223$. Findings provide preliminary evidence showing that men and women religious leaders do not differ in their wisdom and spiritual health. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we suggested further inquiry in this direction to advance the existing body of knowledge on wisdom and spiritual health.

Keywords: Catholic Church, human development, religion, spiritual health, theology, vocation.

Introduction

With an estimated population of 230 million, Nigeria is the most populous black nation and the 6th most populated country in the world (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024). Globally, Nigeria is also the 7th most religious country, with 94% of the population saying that religion is very important to them (Burge, 2023); and the second-most praying country after Afghanistan, with over 95% praying daily (Odili, 2023). The country has various religious practices, with Christianity and Islam being the most predominant. Islam is estimated to be over half of the population (53.5%), while Christians are about 45.9% of the population (Sasu, 2023; Simwa, 2023). Of the total Christian population in Nigeria, 10.6% are Roman Catholics (Sasu, 2023; Simwa, 2023). With such high-end statistics, it is then safe to agree that religion is synonymous with the culture and everyday life of Nigerians.

Every religion has a leadership structure that serves and leads the religious community. Religious leaders are basically charged with roles such as preaching and teaching the tenets of their faith, leadership and encouragement of the religion and discipleship, pastoral care, ensuring peace and unity in their community, and leading exemplary lives. The roles of religious leaders encompass the following areas: performing rites for important life events, offering support and guidance to individuals, delivering religious speeches, providing biblical education, coordinating church and community activities, as well as managing staff, buildings, and finances (Ford, 2009; Guerin, 2019).

However, in highly religious countries such as Nigeria, the roles of religious leaders are extended to leading or supporting roles in political and economic movements (Dowd, 2015; Emeaku, 2023). More so, like roles in health, care, and emergency services, studies have shown the clergy role to be extra-demanding as collaborators in the delivery of mental health care (James et al., 2014; Nwafor, 2024). One such powerful group of religious leaders is the Catholic clergy/priests and religious.

The Catholic clergy are ordained ministers entrusted with the privilege and responsibility of serving and leading in the Catholic Church. Approximately, there are over 15,000 clergy members in Nigeria (Catholics and Culture, 2023). The most prominent group of the clergy within the Roman Catholic Church are the deacons, the priests, and the bishops. The Catholic Priesthood in Nigeria is exclusively for men who are ordained with the power to consecrate the Eucharist during Holy Mass. They can be either diocesan priests (secular priest) who are under the authority of the local ordinary (bishop or archbishop) or religious priests who take vows within a religious order to work in parishes, institutions or do other missionary work assigned by their superiors. Some examples of the approved Catholic religious priests or orders in Nigeria are the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), Schoenstatt's Fathers, Holy Ghost Fathers, Opus Dei, the Redemptorists, Carmelites, Fathers, Salesian Fathers, Claretian Fathers, Dominican Fathers, Sons of Mary Mother of Mercy, Congregation of Fathers of Jesus the Saviour, etc.

Another group of people often referred to as the religious are men and women who serve the Church as brothers, friars and sisters taking either solemn or simple vows to God and their community but are not ordained. They are said to be professed. Examples of the religious congregations that do not have priestly ordination in Nigeria are the Benedictines, Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy, Daughters of Divine Love, Immaculate Heart Sisters, Sisters of Jesus the Saviour, Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, Daughters of the Charity Of the Most Precious Blood, Oblates Sisters of St. Joseph, as well as religious brothers, the monks or friars, and the nuns in monasteries. As spiritual mentors and representatives of the Catholic faith, they have a position of confidence in their interactions with persons under their spiritual care. They look out for the welfare of the congregation while taking the practical, necessary steps to ensure total inclusiveness for everyone. People usually ascribe high levels of wisdom and spirituality to the clergy (Lathrop, 2006; Wilhoit & Howard, 2020).

Although there is no agreed definition of wisdom, many individuals conceptualise wisdom as a combination of cognitive, philosophical, and emotional factors (Bangen et al., 2013; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Wisdom refers to the capacity to think and behave using experience, information, understanding, intuition, and profound insight (Iyanda, 2019). Wisdom may also be understood as the mental capacity to acquire and use information depending on the anticipated beneficial or negative outcome of that knowledge (McLaughlin & McMinn, 2015). Greek philosophers outlined several forms of specialised knowledge including '*sophia*' (philosophical wisdom), '*phronesis*' (practical wisdom), '*episteme*' (factual wisdom), '*techne*' (artistic wisdom), '*scientia*' (scientific wisdom), and '*sapientia*' (religious wisdom) (Takahashi, 2019). Wisdom is considered necessary among the Catholic clergy because it enables them to demonstrate a broader and more flexible perspective, make good judgements and decisions, and adapt to changing circumstances (Karthikeyan, 2024).

The relational model of wisdom proposes that wisdom is a combination of two modes - analytic and synthetic - that are both essential and work together harmoniously (Takahashi & Overton, 2005). An analytical approach to wisdom focuses on unique components that are generally associated with cognitive, intellectual, and information-processing abilities. This approach views wisdom as a continuous and cumulative process of growth. It refers to a kind of "process wisdom" that is present in traditional Western wisdom, which emphasises reasoning based on knowledge (Moody, 1995). Baltes and his colleagues characterised this kind of wisdom as an "expert knowledge system" or "pragmatics of intelligence" (Baltes & Smith, 1990). Alternatively, the synthetic mode of wisdom involves the use of logical processes of the mind to change life experiences into new and integrated forms. It focuses on the expressive and constitutive aspects of human activity, where behaviour associated with wisdom is seen to be a manifestation of underlying psychological systems or organisations, such as cognitive and emotional processes. The fundamental premise of synthetic wisdom is outlined by the theories of E. H. Erikson and Piaget, which highlight the significance of a "heightened awareness" (Erikson et al., 1986). Heightened awareness in adulthood is a state of advanced ego integration, characterised by the ability to separate from and reflect on one's prior self and experiences. Wise people choose to be alone when they are consciously aware of themselves and their environment (Ardelt, 2004).

There is a debate on whether wisdom should be considered a construct that is not influenced by gender, so as to avoid emphasising certain traits that are traditionally associated with certain genders and perhaps fostering gender discrimination (Levenson, 2009; Xiong & Wang, 2021). In different dialogues and writings on Plato's work, researchers have drawn some conclusive statements that "men who were cowards or led unrighteous lives may be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation" (Timaeus, 1892). For Plato, women possess less virtue compared to males (Plato, 2009; Xiong & Wang, 2021). Christianity adopted the Greek philosophical belief that women are lacking wisdom and should thus submit to the teachings of their husbands (Xiong & Wang, 2021). Based on some extant research (Orwoll & Achenbaum, 1993; Ardel; 2009), it is proposed that differences between genders in wisdom may only be apparent at lower levels of knowledge. This is because persons who possess a high level of wisdom are expected to succeed in all aspects of wisdom.

The examination of gender differences has been considered a captivating topic for several researchers who endeavour to comprehend and explore religious-related issues. Since ancient times, gender-related problems have had an impact on the activities that men and females engage in as well as the connection that they have with one another (Okoli & Okwuosa, 2020). However, although some researchers (e.g., Ardel, 2009; Treichler et al., 2022) found no difference in wisdom among men and women others (e.g., Cheraghi et al., 2015; Maroof et al., 2015) contradict this view. Treichler et al. (2022) used the 3-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS) and the San Diego Wisdom Scale (SD-WISE) to compare gender wisdom capabilities in 659 people aged 27–103. They found that women scored higher on 3D-WS but not SD-WISE. Women performed better on SD-WISE Self-Reflection and compassion domains. Men performed better on SD-WISE Emotion Regulation and cognitive areas. Women and men may have varied knowledge strengths, possibly due to social and biological variables.

In another study, Cheraghi et al. (2015) found that gender and age cohort interaction was significant for three-dimensional wisdom and all cognitive, reflective, and compassionate dimensions of wisdom in an Iranian sample of 439 adults. Older women scored lower on cognitive wisdom than younger women and older men, but equal scores on compassionate wisdom. Maroof et al. (2015) found no gender difference in wisdom's cognitive component in 400 Pakistani adults (185 men and 215 females, ages 17 to 50) from diverse educational and job institutions. They found males outperformed women in emotional and reflective knowledge. Prior research has not examined wisdom among religious leaders, and we did not find any existing empirical research on wisdom in Nigeria.

In addition to wisdom, spiritual well-being is another important factor of interest for religious leaders. Spiritual well-being involves connection with a superior power, which enhances connectivity to others and understanding the meaning and purpose of life (Razaghi et al., 2019). Spiritual well-being has both a psychosocial or existential component and a religious component (Alborzi et al., 2019; Dalmidam et al., 2011; Ellison, 1983; Ghaderi et al., 2018). The psychosocial or existential component refers to one's connection with God or a supreme being, while the existential or psychosocial component refers to one's meaning and purpose in life. Dallard (2023) proposed that spiritual well-being is based on three areas of life experience: relationships, personal values, and a purpose in life. Spiritual well-being has several significant benefits. For instance, it creates a sense of contentment and satisfaction with life, gives a sense of belonging, helps to build relationships, helps to accept life challenges, and pull through them, helps to gain control over one's life, and most importantly, helps to find purpose and meaning (Dallard, 2023; Pant & Srivastava, 2019; Tumanggor, 2019). Spiritual well-being also serves as a motivator for stability, purpose, and satisfaction in life, as well as trust in oneself (Rovers & Kocum, 2010). It is positively connected with health-promoting practices (Mehri et al., 2016); and those with greater levels of spiritual well-being had a higher quality of life, since spirituality is a step towards reducing anxiety and stress (Tarrahi et al., 2021).

The concept of spiritual well-being is particularly vital to the position of religious leaders as well as to their mental health (Bangcola & Pangandaman, 2022; Ellison et al., 2010; Kansiewicz et al., 2022). For these leaders to be productive and effective in their vocation, spiritual well-being is essential (Ellison et al., 2010). Spiritual well-being of priests and religious includes factors such as a deep connection to God, coping with stress via prayer or Bible study, and retaining a strong sense of calling (Bickerton et al., 2015). Formulations from clinical, developmental, existential, and humanistic psychology have been interwoven into an integrative model of spiritual well-being. Based on Maslow's theory (1955, 1968), it is necessary to fulfil the basic needs before one can achieve self-actualization, which involves personal growth and development. Self-actualizers were characterised as those who consistently maintained a sense of novelty and gratitude, actively engaging in life with enjoyment, astonishment, and amazement, which may be seen as having a spiritual dimension. Erikson's (1959) final stage of ego integrity includes emotional integration, acceptance of one's previous existence, a sense of camaraderie with past times, and a compassion for humanity that exceeds self-interest.

Research supports the notion that women are more religious than men (Pinki et al., 2023); but there have been inconsistent findings on gender differences in spiritual well-being (Alorani & Alradaydeh, 2018; Arfianto et al., 2023; Hamka et al., 2019; Hammermeister et al., 2005; Hendricks-Ferguson, 2006; Jafaria et al., 2010). While some

studies reported higher levels of spiritual well-being among females than males (Alorani & Alradaydeh, 2018; Jafaria et al., 2010; Maazallahi et al., 2021), others found no significant gender difference in spiritual well-being (Arfianto et al., 2023; Hamka et al., 2019). Maazallahi et al. (2021) attributed the possible higher levels of spiritual well-being among females to variations in societal norms, personal life experiences, adaptive mechanisms, the diverse roles and traits of women, and their stronger conformity with spiritual ideals. While most of the studies on spiritual well-being have been conducted among students, patients, and older adults (Alorani & Alradaydeh, 2018; Arfianto et al., 2023; Hamka et al., 2019; Hendricks-Ferguson, 2006; Khodarahimi et al., 2021), there is a lack of evidence from the Nigerian setting and limited research have been done among religious leaders. Such information could help in determining how best to enhance their quality of life as well as influence policies being made in view of their vocations. The objective of this research, therefore, was to determine whether there would be gender differences in wisdom and spiritual well-being among priests and religious people in Nigeria. The researchers therefore hypothesised as follows (a) Men will report higher wisdom than women; and (2) Women will have higher spiritual well-being compared to men.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants in the present study were 107 Nigerian priests and religious (men = 71%, $n = 76$; women = 29%, $n = 31$), who completed an online survey on wellbeing which was which was shared on social media platforms of priests and religious groups within Nigeria. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 69 years ($M = 47.45$ years; $SD = 8.45$). The inclusion criteria for the study were being an ordained Catholic clergy (priest, bishop, or deacon) or a religious (monk, nun, religious brother, or religious sister), English language literacy, and working in Nigeria at the time of data collection. Majority (86.9%; $n = 93$) of the participants were from the Igbo ethnic group, while 7.5% ($n = 8$) represented other ethnic groups in Nigeria. By way of education, they had bachelor's degree (26.2%, $n = 28$), master's degree (21.5%, $n = 23$), PhD (21.5%, $n = 23$) and other academic qualifications (30.8%, $n = 33$). For their occupations, they were engaged in pastoral work (40.2%, $n = 43$), teaching (21.5%, $n = 23$), civil service (10.3%, $n = 11$), healthcare (12.1%, $n = 13$), and other jobs (9.3%, $n = 10$). The study was approved by the psychology research ethics committee of the university of Nigeria Nsukka. Data collection lasted for a total of four weeks in last quarter of 2024.

Measures

The instruments used for data collection were Brief Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (Fung et al., 2020) and the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzain & Ellison, 1982) were used for data collection. The Brief Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (BSAWS) (Fung et al., 2020) is a 9-item questionnaire that assesses an individual's self-reported level of wisdom. Some of the items on the scale include "I wonder many times about the mysteries of life and what lies beyond death" and "I often use humour to put other people at ease". Responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores on the scale range from 9 to 54, with higher scores indicating higher levels of wisdom. The developers reported a Cronbach's α of 0.81 (Fung et al., 2020). For the current sample, we obtained a Cronbach's α of .78.

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982) is a 20-item measure that assesses overall spiritual quality of life - an individual's belief and relationship with God as well as sense of meaning and purpose in life. Responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). Eleven of the items were reverse scored. Scores range from 20-120 and high scores indicate higher spiritual wellbeing. Some of the items on the scale include "I don't find much satisfaction in private prayer with God" and "I believe God is impersonal and not interested in my daily situations." Jafari et al. (2013) reported a Cronbach's α of 0.81. Amir et al. (2021) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.92 for the questionnaire. The spiritual well-being scale has been revalidated in Nigeria. Okoli et al. (2022) reported a Cronbach's α of 0.93, while Olatubi et al. (2021) also reported a Cronbach's α of 0.70 with Nigerian samples. For the current study, the Cronbach's α was 0.81.

Design and Analysis

The study is a descriptive study, and it employed a cross-sectional design. The data collected was exported into IBM SPSS version 25 for further analysis. To test the study hypotheses, an Independent Sample *T*-test was conducted to compare the gender differences in wisdom and spiritual well-being scores of the participants.

Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the demographic characteristics (N = 107)

Variables	Description	Frequency (%)
Age	Range = 21 – 69 Mean = 47.45 SD = 8.45	
Number of years as religious or clergy	Range = 1 – 43 Mean = 19.06 SD = 9.04	
Gender	Male Female	31 (29%) 76 (71%)
Level of education	B. Sc M. Sc Ph. D Others	28 (26.2%) 23 (21.5%) 23 (21.5%) 33 (30.8%)
Ethnicity	Igbo Others	93 (86.9%) 8 (7.5%)
Occupation	Teaching Religious/Priest Civil servant Student Health worker Others	23 (21.5%) 43 (40.2%) 11 (10.3%) 3 (2.8%) 13 (12.1%) 10 (9.3%)

Table 2: Independent Sample T-test for gender differences in wisdom and spiritual wellbeing among Nigerian priests and religious

	Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% C. I.	
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Lower	Upper
Wisdom	.02	.890	.11	96	.912	.21	1.86	-3.49	3.91
Spiritual well-being	.05	.826	1.23	87	.223	2.22	2.62	-1.99	8.43

Results from table 2 showed that there was no significant gender difference in wisdom for men ($M = 43.16$, $SD = 8.73$) and women ($M = 42.96$, $SD = 8.51$), $t(107) = .11$, $p = .912$. Also, there was no significant gender difference in spiritual well-being between men ($M = 74.64$, $SD = 11.50$) and women ($M = 71.43$, $SD = 11.47$), $t(107) = 1.23$, $p = .223$.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to investigate gender differences in wisdom and spiritual well-being among priests and religious in Nigeria. The result revealed that there were no significant gender differences in wisdom among the clergy in Nigeria. Thus, the first hypothesis, which stated that men would report higher wisdom than women was not confirmed. This is in consonance with the previous studies which reported no difference in wisdom among men and women (Ardelt, 2009; Treichler et al., 2022). Wisdom ought to be a gender-neutral notion so that it does not contribute to the maintenance of gender discrimination by fostering characteristics that are associated with one gender or another in the context of existing gender norms (Levenson, 2009). In the traditional patriarchal religious society, only men were scribes and were educated in the law and its wisdom. However, the theological and biblical understanding of wisdom extends its application equally to women. For instance, the Book of Proverbs 9:1 states that “the wisdom of a woman builds her house.” Xiong and Wang (2021) also argued that there may be no gender differences in wisdom because both men and women possess a comparable understanding of the implied meanings of wisdom and have almost equal views on how it is manifested in actual life.

We also found that there was no significant gender differences in spiritual well-being; hence, the second hypothesis, which stated that women would have higher spiritual well-being compared to men was not confirmed. This finding supports the past findings of lack of gender difference in spiritual well-being (Arfianto et al., 2023; Hamka et al., 2019). Apparently, this finding may be connected to the socialisation, expected duties, life experiences, coping mechanisms, and training that priests and religious members go through prior to their ordination or profession. All priests and religious members may have received the same level of socialisation to help them nurture, collaborate, and control their feelings.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study demonstrated that both men and women have strengths in wisdom and spiritual well-being. This challenges the existing assumptions about how men and

women are viewed in some parts of the world where men are seen as superior beings, especially among the priests and religious. As a result of the promotion of gender equality in contemporary society and the cultural importance that is put on "masculine" cognitive characteristics such as intellectual independence, objectivity, and reason, it is very possible that parents now foster the development of these qualities in both their sons and daughters. Also, Catholic theology teaches the equality of men and women as part of the divine design, each having equal dignity and gifts. Religious organisations church needs to allocate equal efforts towards implementing spiritual well-being interventions to improve the overall well-being of clergy members, regardless of their gender. Interventions that emphasise the essential elements of spiritual well-being, such as a feeling of connection to others, finding meaning and purpose in life, and promoting overall well-being, might be beneficial for the clergy, as this will also help them in other aspects of their health, such as promoting happiness and resiliency.

Limitations of the study and Suggestions for Further Studies

Although this study showed insignificant gender differences in wisdom and spiritual well-being, these results, on the other hand, must be interpreted with a certain degree of caution. To be more specific, owing to the limits of this study's methodology, it is not possible to draw complete conclusions or assumptions about the results. Firstly, the choice of a cross-sectional design for the study limits the study from making casual statements, and the findings may not be consistent overtime. Hence, further studies could replicate the findings of the study, using longitudinal designs to measure the variables over a period and perhaps think towards causal explanations. Secondly, there are approximately over 15,000 clergy in Nigeria (Catholics and Culture, 2023); however, the present study, due to time and financial constraints, only assessed 107 clergy members. Since this is not a fair representation of the total population, the findings of the study will therefore be generalised with caution.

Thirdly, due to the poor internet connectivity in Nigeria, not all the clergy members may have had access to the questionnaire since completing the instrument required an internet connection. This may mean that only those within areas with clear internet access at the time of data collection may have participated in the study. We also suggest qualitative approach to understand the different perspectives, experiences, and contexts of the priests and religious in Nigeria regarding wisdom and spiritual well-being. Interviews and focus group discussions may better explore the topic of interest. Finally, studies in the future should investigate the potential moderators and mediators of gender in relation to wisdom and spiritual well-being. These include assessments of coping, and other factors that may contribute to a possible gender gap in spiritual health and wisdom. More research in this area may lead to better interventions to improve spiritual health and wisdom among religious leaders while adding to the existing body of knowledge.

Conclusion

Ours is the first to give empirical attention to wisdom and spiritual well-being of religious leaders in Nigeria. The results of this research demonstrated that religious men and women in Nigeria did not differ in terms of spiritual well-being or wisdom. The views and lifestyle of the clergy, irrespective of their gender, are readily absorbed by their congregations, who consider them role models. Hence, there is a need to acknowledge that women in religious life or vocations have almost the same competence and virtue as their male counterparts.

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