Guidance and Counselling Implications of Examination Anxiety as a Predictor of Students' Attitude Towards Examination Malpractices

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Abstract The study investigated the relationship between examination anxiety and students' attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State. The population of the study consisted of 12,000 first year regular students in eight tertiary invitations in Delta State. The proportional stratified sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 1,200 subjects who responded to the Examination Anxiety and Attitude Questionnaire. Data collected was analyzed with correlation and multiple regression statistics and it was found that there is a positive relationship between examination anxiety and attitude towards cheating in examinations. Students who possessed high examination anxiety were more predisposed towards cheating in examinations. Therefore it was recommended that measures of examination anxiety could be used by Counsellors to identify students who were likely to engage in examination malpractices so that proactive therapies could be administered on them prior to their sitting for the actual examinations.

Keywords: Guidance, Counselling, Examination, Anxiety.

Introduction

Examination anxiety which is also referred to as “test anxiety” in literature is a state of uneasiness, worry or feelings of uncertainty about an impending or on-going evaluation programme (Okorodudu & Ossai, 2004). Examination anxiety as an educational phenomenon is well documented in research literature. For example, Spilberger & Vagg (1995) identified two types of anxiety states which impede academic performance. These are “State” and “Trait” anxiety. “State” anxiety manifest in form of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry as well as other related physiological stimulation which emanate from the stimulation of the autonomic nervous system. “State” anxiety is identifiable from bodily reactions such as excessive perspiration, trembling hands, increased heartbeat and so on. These are symptoms of state anxiety. Most students actually experience “state” anxiety at the moment of taking important examinations but the degree of its intensity will depend among other things on the students' level of Trait Anxiety. Trait anxiety is a relatively stable proneness to react to situations or impending events with high level of worry or apprehension. Trait anxiety accounts for individual differences in the tendency to respond to situations perceived as threatening with elevations in “state” anxiety symptoms. For example, the amount of “state” anxiety exhibited by a student who is preparing for or actually writing examinations will depend on the students’ level of trait anxiety. Hence, individuals could be classified as having either high or low examination anxiety levels.

Studies have shown that high levels of trait examination anxiety lead to poor academic achievement (Mealey & Host, 1992; Austin, Partridge, Bitner & Wadlington, 1995; Cassidy, 2001; Sweetnam, 2002; Okorodudu & Ossai, 2004). Typically, students who are high on examination anxiety tend to perform poorly in academic work due to their lack of knowledge in the subject matter as well as the cognitive distraction created by task-irrelevant thinking in the examination situation (Musch & Brother, 1999).

Based on this premise of high examination anxiety leading to poor academic performance, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between examination anxiety and students' attitude towards examination malpractices. The study intends to establish levels of examination anxiety as likely predictors of students' proneness to engage in examination malpractices.
Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical models exist for the explanation of the relationships between examination anxiety and academic performance. These are, the interference model by Sarason (1988); deficit model by Birenbaum & Pinku (1997); and interference-deficit model by Musch & Brother (1999). The interference model portrays the examination-anxious student as one who knows the course material, but forgets all that he has learnt during examination thereby failing to recall already learnt material (Hembree, 1990). This theory further states that students with high levels of examination anxiety tend to divide their attention between task (test-taking) demands and negative self-preoccupations (worry and emotions) under examination conditions hence performance is interfered with. The poor academic performance of highly anxious students was, therefore, seen as a consequence of this interference by negative thoughts and emotions during examinations. On the basis of this model, examination anxiety reduction counselling techniques are applied on students who show high levels of anxiety. The deficit model of examination anxiety, on the other hand, accounts for low academic performance of highly anxious students in terms of insufficient knowledge of the course material due to poor study habits and the metcognitive awareness of this lack of knowledge of subject matter during examinations. Thus, the thrust of the deficit theory is that poor academic performance is traceable to inadequate mastery of course material rather than interference in recalling material that has been thoroughly learned. The deficit-interference model does not consider either of the two models (interference and deficit) as mutually exclusive. The two models are seen to be complementary rather than contradictory.

The present study is anchored on the deficit model. It considers the examination anxious student as one who does not study adequately for examination hence he or she looks for the easy way out. In other words, the tendency to engage in examination malpractices is premeditated and planned for. This agrees with the attitudinal theory of Reasoned Action, and Planned Behaviour. There is a link between attitude, intention and behaviour as far as engaging in examination malpractices is concerned. Positive disposition towards examination malpractices leads to the intention to engage in the act which in turn triggers the planning for the cheating behaviour during examinations.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The major purpose of the study is to establish the nature of the relationship between examination anxiety and students’ attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State. The study also examined the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between examination anxiety and students’ attitude towards examination malpractices. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether students who have high examination anxiety levels are more favourably disposed towards engaging in examination malpractices. It also intends to determine whether there are differences in male or female disposition towards examination malpractices. The study is significant because it will provide the basis for using measures of examination anxiety as a determinant of students’ disposition towards examination malpractices. Thus, Counsellors and teachers will be able to identify students who are likely to engage in examination malpractices on the basis of their scores on an examination anxiety inventory. Such students will, there, be subjected to proactive counseling or reorientation before they sit for the actual examination. This preventive approach will help to eradicate examination malpractices from our educational system. Hence, the Nigerian Society will benefit a lot from the results of this study.

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the study:

(i) What is the nature of the relationship between examination anxiety and students’ attitude towards examination malpractices?
(ii) Does gender moderate the relationship between students' examination anxiety and their attitude towards examination malpractices?

Research Hypotheses

The two null hypotheses tested in the study at 0.05 level of significance were:
(i) There is no significant relationship between examination anxiety and students' attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State.
(ii) Gender does not significantly moderate the relationship between students' examination anxiety and their attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State.

Method of the Study

The correlation research design was used in the study. The correlation design provides a basis for determining the degree of association between two variables. Though, it does not allow for cause-effect interpretation, it gives an indication of prediction of outcome in the relation between two or more variables. The population of the study consisted of 12,000 first year regular students in tertiary institutions in Delta State. Freshmen were used for the study because they are relatively inexperienced hence they freely exhibit symptoms of examination anxiety and attitude towards examination malpractices. As students progress in academic years those with inappropriate examination anxiety level and notorious attitude towards examination malpractices may either drop out or are expelled or they improve. Hence, most studies on examination anxiety and academic performance focus on freshmen such as Musch & Broder 1999; Elliot, McGregor & Gable, 1999; Diaz, Glass, Arnkoff & TanofskyKraff 2001; Okorodudu & Ossai, 2004. The proportional stratified sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 1300 but after administration of the instrument, 1200 that completed the questionnaire correctly were used in the data analysis. Proportional stratified sampling technique was used because it allowed for selection of subjects in such a way that identified sub-groups of the population such as institution, courses and gender were represented in the sample in the same proportion that they existed in the population.

The research instrument was tagged Examination Anxiety and Attitude questionnaire”. It consisted of 45 items divided into two sections. Examination Anxiety section had 20 items while the Attitude towards examination malpractices section had 15 items. The four-point likert format was used in the instrument with strongly Agree (AS) = 4 points; Agree (A) = 3 points, Agree (A) points, Disagree (D) = 2 points; and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1 point. The items in the Examination Anxiety section were adapted from the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI) by Spielberger (1980) while items in the Examination Attitude section were constructed by the researcher. However, all 45 items were validated using thirty Nigerian Subjects and their reliability index were also ascertained. The Cronbach Alpha method was used to determine the measure of internal consistency which is indicative of construct validity and internal reliability (Okorodudu, 2004). Cronbach Alpha for the Examination Anxiety = 0.71 and the Examination Attitude = 0.67. Test-retest correlation coefficient(r) for the Examination Anxiety over a four week interval = 0.79 and Examination Attitude = 0.87. These indices were indicative of high construct validity and reliability. Face and content validity were ascertained by three experts in educational measurement and evaluation. Data collected with the instrument was analyzed with correlation and multiple regression and the hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.
Results

The correlation Coefficient (r) between examination anxiety and examination malpractices is .58 (P<0.05). This indicated that there is significant positive correlation between the two variables. Therefore, the answer to research question 1 is that there is positive Correlation between examination anxiety and students’ attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State. Null hypothesis 1 is also rejected. There is significant relationship between examination anxiety and students’ attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State.

Data in Table 1 below was used to answer research question 2 and test hypothesis 2

Table 1: Moderating Impact of Gender on the Relationship between Examination Anxiety and Attitude towards Examination Malpractices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable **</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SEB</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>15.61*</td>
<td>Significant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam Anxiety</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>20.50*</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>Not Significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dependent Variable: Attitude towards Examination Malpractices *P<0.05

Data in Table 1 above show that gender does not significantly moderate the relationship between examination anxiety and attitude towards examination malpractices. The entry of gender into the regression did not affect the significant t-value of the relationship between examination anxiety and attitude towards examination malpractices (t = 20.50, P<0.05). Moreover, the relationship between gender and attitude towards examination malpractices is not significant (t = 0.71, P>0.05). Therefore, the answer to research question 2 is that gender does not moderate the relationship between examination anxiety and students’ attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State. Null hypothesis 2 is upheld.

Discussion of Results and Implications for Guidance and Counselling

The major findings of this study are that there is significant positive relationship between examination anxiety and students’ attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State; and that gender does not significantly moderate this relationship. This implies that students who manifest high examination anxiety levels are more likely to be positively disposed towards engaging in examination malpractices irrespective of their gender. This finding tends to support the deficit model theory of examination anxiety as propounded by Birenbaum & Pinku (1997). This theory states that students who are highly anxious of examinations seem to lack concentration when studying. This may account for their resort to examination malpractices. Such students, therefore, may have insufficient knowledge of the course material. Without engaging in examination malpractices, such students would end up with poor academic performance as suggested by Musch & Broder (1999); Cassidy (2001); Okorodudu & Ossai (2004). The finding that gender is a non-moderator of the relationship between examination anxiety and students’ attitude towards examination malpractices is consistent with findings in similar studies by Musch & Broder (1999), Ogunsanya (2003) and Ossai (2003). This is not surprising as reports have shown that male and female students engage in examination malpractices (Ogunsanya, 2003; Ogunlowo, 2004; Onyechere, 2004).

The findings of this study have implications for the Counselling profession. Proactive or preventive counseling approach should be adopted by Guidance Counsellors to reorientate students who are prone to engaging in examination malpractices. Proactive counseling refers to professional services provided by a
trained Counsellor to prevent a student from engaging in examination malpractices and this is predicated on objective assessment of students study habits prior to sitting for examinations (Ossai, 2004a). For this preventive approach to be effective, more professionally trained Counsellors should be employed to render skillful counseling services to the teeming population of students in our educational institutions. Moreover, the success of this preventive approach is also dependent on availability of standardized psychological tests in Nigeria schools such as Study Habit Inventories, Examination Anxiety and Attitude Inventories, Personality Test Inventories, and so on. A conscious effort should be made to administer the psychological tests on a cross section of students and the results from such test administration should be properly interpreted and used as a basis for inviting students for Counselling interviews (Ossai, 2004b).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has thrown up the view that measures of students' examination anxiety gives an insight into their likely attitude towards examination malpractices in tertiary institutions in Delta State. Be that as it may, the following recommendations are made:

(i) Standardized examination anxiety inventories should be made available for Counsellors in tertiary institutions.
(ii) Teachers and Counsellors should be trained or retrained on the procedures for administration, scoring and interpretation of scores of standardized examination anxiety inventories in relation to students' attitude towards examination malpractices.
(iii) Examination Attitude Inventories should be developed for use in tertiary institutions;
(iv) Measures of students' examination anxiety and attitude towards examination malpractice could be used to identify students who are likely to engage in examination malpractices;
(v) Reorientation programmes and proactive counselling, should be organized for students who show tendency to engage in examination malpractices.

References


