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## Religious Status And Affiliation As Factors On Attitudes On Abortion

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### Abstract

Religious status and affiliation were assessed as factors to examine their effects on the attitudes on abortion. Two hundred (200) participants (99 clergy and 101 laity) took part in the study. Each of the participants was administered the Attitude to Abortion Scale (AAS) which is a likert-form questionnaire developed by the researcher. Two hypotheses, which included (1) religious status will not significantly affect attitudes on abortion, and (2) religious affiliation will not significantly affect attitudes on abortion, were postulated and tested. Results of a 2-way analysis of variance showed that the attitudes of the higher status participants (the clergy) and the lower status participants (the laity) significantly differed. On the contrary, there was no significant difference between the attitudes of Catholics and Protestants on abortion. It was suggested that sexual knowledge may not have enough impact on abortion related decisions. Rather, it is moral judgement, which ushers in feelings of pronounced guilt, sadness, and regret, that appears to deter individuals from indulging in abortion. Implications of the findings were discussed within the context of the debate over the morality of abortion and the problem of unwanted teenage pregnancy.

### Introduction

The word abortion refers to the wilful termination of pregnancy before the foetus is fully developed. The practice of abortion can be said to be an age-long thing. Yet, this method of fertility control appears to be the most clandestine form of birth control in the modern world. It is perhaps the high incidence of abortion in the world today that has given rise to increased debate on whether abortion should be legalized or not.

International Encyclopaedia for Social Sciences (1968, p. 450) has provided evidence that abortion has been practised in all cultures for every conceivable reason and through a vast array of techniques. For example, ancient Chinese work by Emperor Shen Nung 4,600 years ago, contains a recipe for the induction of abortion using mercury. In ancient Greece, Aristotle and Plato were said to have advocated abortion as a form of birth control measure and maintenance of economically healthy society. Hippocrates, the great ancient physician, was also observed to have recommended a physical excision of the foetus as the best method.

Even among prehistoric people, as suggested by observation of uncivilized groups still living in many parts of the world today, induced abortion seems to have been common and the motivation to carry out this act appears to have been much the same as it is in civilized societies. These motivations include, extreme youth or advanced age of the woman,

economic hardship, desire of single women to escape the agony of disgrace, and a host of other biological and social considerations.

However, with the rise of the Jewish and Christian religions, abortion became a moral issue occasioning blame or condemnation by adherents. For example, in English common law, abortion was regarded as a punishable offence, unless it was committed after the first felt movements of the foetus in the womb. In the United States of America, abortion did not become a statutory crime, until about 1830. Strong prohibitions apparently commenced with the Roman Catholic Church in 1869, which later led to stringent anti-abortion laws being promulgated in England and the United States in the 19th century.

Obama (2005) has revealed that there is a sustained argument for and against abortion in the United States, and observation indicates that elsewhere in the world, especially in Nigeria, there is such argument going on. The objection to abortion appears to be based on moral grounds. Most people who oppose abortion often contend that human life begins at conception, when ovum, or egg cell, of a woman is fertilized by a sperm cell of a man (Awake, 2009, p. 5). Their contention is then that abortion amounts to an act of homicide or murder. They suggest that this opens the door to brutalization of society, encouraging mercy killing, infanticide, use of gas chamber and the violations of the sanctity of life. In addition, they believe that abortion undermines the social structure by encouraging promiscuous sexual relationships and by weakening family ties and raising legal problems with regards to property ownership and inheritance.

Wehmeier (2000) showed that differences in attitude towards abortion may emanate from understanding of the concept of abortion itself. For example, there are two clearly designated members of a religion, namely, the clergy and the laity. The clergy are the priests or ministers of a religion, especially of the Christian Church, whereas the laity is used to refer to all the members of a church who are not clergy. The clergy in a given church are also described as leaders, which suggests that they are higher status persons, and the lay persons are followers, which implies that they may be operationally defined as lower status persons.

Differences in attitude towards abortion inducement among these two groups, as Wehmeier (2000) observed, may occur ostensibly due to the fact that lay persons cannot really understand the religious implications of abortion as much as the clergy who are religious experts. This implies that religious status tends to influence differences in attitude towards abortion inducement.

Additionally, Wehmeier (2000, p. 938) revealed that the Protestant Church refers to the Western Christian Church that separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. Religious affiliation is often used to refer to an individual's choice of a given church. Thus, Wehmeier's (2000) finding suggests that religious affiliation may to a larger or lesser extent influence one's attitude in matters relating to abortion.

In the medical arena, many professionals regard abortion as obtuse due to their training as guardians of life. Some medical doctors believe that abortion may cause sterility, menstrual disorders, ectopic pregnancy (i.e., implantation of the fertilized ovum in the fallopian tube), miscarriage, and abnormal child delivery symptoms.

On the contrary, the defenders of abortion argue that the embryo does not become a human being until 12 to 28 weeks of gestation. Their notions for legalization of abortion seem to be based on the grounds that the overarching consideration should be the physical and mental health of the prospective child. They believe that organic lesions develop mental

defects and biophysical, biochemical and glandular dysfunctions are the primary causes of many observable manifestations of handicapping conditions. They observe that infections, intoxications, metabolic disturbances, glandular malfunctions, and genetic factors can manifest themselves in muscular weakness and paralysis, maldevelopment, blindness, deafness, psychoses and mental retardation. They then suggest that rearing a deformed or mentally defective child may have adverse effect on the family, and that this can be prevented by termination of the foetus before the birth. They think that the outlawing of abortion with the attendant lack of medical regulations and safeguards has made abortion a leading public health problem in many countries, because a large proportion of women have been killed, or at least irreparably damaged, by unskilled operators.

Some theories have been put forward to articulate views on abortion. These theories include (1) Judio-Christian model, (2) social-learning model, (3) biological model, and (4) cognitive model. For instance, Judio-Christian proponents, such as Couric (2000), suggest that the individuality of life of an innocent person does not depend on its greater or lesser value. It proposes that the life of an innocent is untouchable. This notion is based on the conviction that any direct aggression against an innocent is a violation of one of the basic laws, without which humans cannot live together. Judio-Christians then believe that abortion should be prohibited, because it amounts to wasting of an innocent life which violates the basic law of living together.

Social-learning theorists agree with Judio-Christian believers that abortion, or wasting of innocent life, should be discouraged but contend that this phenomenon is related to socio-economic and other environmental factors. These theorists, such as Bandura (1977), propose that conditions leading to abortion are caused and sustained by the social-psychological conditions of the individual's life. The social-learning conception of abortions is that the manifestations of these conditions are acquired, maintained, and altered in exactly the same way as are those processes of an individual's behaviour considered normal. The socio-learning proponents assume that it is the stimulus condition of the environment which requires responses that are responsible for abortion. Consequently, these theorists contend that if individuals could be provided with appropriate physical, social, and psychological environments, abortion would be eliminated.

Biological model is closely associated with the work of Gregor Mendel (1822-1884). The biological proponents argue that the science of genetics has made it possible to identify the factor that is responsible for most of what humans do. The factor is known as gene. Genes are found in chromosomes located in the nucleus of the cell. The genes are thought to carry inscriptions that are transmitted from parents to offsprings. In addition, genes are believed to interact with the environment and it is the bye-product of this interaction that is observed as behaviour, including abortion. For example, the proponents of the biological model believe that individuals who are involved in abortion must have picked up the tendency from their parents through genetic transmission.

Cognitive theorists, such as Beck (1976) and Ellis (1997), suggest that most incidences of abortion are the result of one or more of the dysfunctional global assumptions that guide an individual's life. These assumptions include "if I have a baby out of wedlock, it would be a mark on my parents", "if I don't have an abortion my parent's friends in the church will regard me as a sinner", and "if I have a baby out of wedlock, my hands will never be accepted in marriage by any man." These theorists believe that these kinds of assumptions could make someone decide to abort her baby. Thus, it can be seen that

cognitive theory suggests that abortion is primarily influenced by an individual's perception or interpretation of the environment and the events that take place.

Allgeier, Allgeier, and Rywick (1981) interviewed 120 undergraduates who varied in their levels of sex guilt subscale of the Mosher forced-choice guilt inventory and sexual knowledge survey. The instrument administered on the participants requested them to indicate the extent of their approval for abortion in response to case histories of applicants. The case histories were in terms of the circumstances under which conception had occurred. Results showed that while sexual knowledge registered negligible effect, sex guilt significantly affected abortion decisions. Low sex guilt participants were more favourable towards abortion when conception was the result of failure of a contraceptive method than the applicant's use of the method. It was also discovered that abortion decisions of high sex-guilt participants were substantially influenced by the relationship of the applicant to her sexual partner. For example, when the relationship was steady the participants approved the request, whereas abortion was denied the applicant who conceived with a casual partner. Results were discussed within the context of the debate over the morality of abortion and the problem of unwanted adolescent pregnancy. It was suggested that presenting the fact; that is, sexual knowledge, may have little impact on abortion related decisions.

Besides the study of Allgeier et al. (1981) which attempted to test the notion that opposition to abortion is based on strong pro-life sentiments, much of the political debates surrounding abortion appears to focus on the issue of when life begins and whether any person has right to terminate it. For example, Granberg (1978) examined the correlation between such factors as opposition to death penalty and the use of military forces, and attitude towards abortion. He conceptualized that a consistent pro-life would involve opposition to the taking of human life. He found scarcely any evidence that opposition to abortion arose from pro-life concerns. Instead, the contrary was the case for some indicators of pro-life sentiments.

Other investigators approached the issue of attitude to abortion from different dimensions. For instance, Noonan (1979) suggested that abortion affects the structure of marriage and family, the role and duties of parents, the paternal part in procreation, and the virtues that characterize motherhood. He believes that an absolute right to abortion poses a threat to family unity and harmony. He concluded that abortion argument has been built in the public mind under the influence of a powerful pro-abortion lobby consisting of doctors, professionals, lawyers, planned parenthood officials and welfare administrators supported by the press.

Caldwell (1981), apparently arguing from feminist view point, remarked that abortion allows a woman to be in control of her husband, that is, the inevitability of male sexuality. She contended that abortion may be followed by a feeling of guilt but that guilt is remorseless.

Smetna (1981) conceptualized, however, that women taking abortion as a moral issue are likely to continue their pregnancies, whereas those treating it as personal issue are more likely to obtain abortion. He observed that moral responses to abortion interviews were highly related to hypothetical moral judgement.

Hippler (1985) regrets that abortion on demand has become a powerful psycho-cultural element in the society. For Hippler (1985), this may be a signal that society is slipping from intrusive socializing and helping models to patterns of an earlier time.

Adebayo and Nassif (1985), nevertheless, suspect acculturation to be responsible for the increasing number of abortion cases in Africa. They believe that marital status, religious preferences and opinion about the contemporary Nigeria are related to attitudes found in the west. They maintain that cultural diffusion is a significant factor in the inclination to favour abortion in Nigeria.

In her own contribution, Hammer (1985) pointed out that in the past women's control over their bodies referred to biological reproduction and, in particular, abortion. In recent years, the implication of this slogan has been extended to the areas of sexuality and child care.

This is perhaps why Ayia (1995) reminds us that children are the treasures of the family and the society as a whole and, as such, the interest of the children should be protected at all times. He said point blank that both abortion and contraception are moral sins. He then pleaded that people should change their ways, call themselves to order before much damage is done to the spiritual, physical and economic life of the people.

Apparently, the psychological damage abortion brings to a human being is devastating. Figerer (1973) had linked abortion to depression. Coleman (as cited in Awake, 2009), who is an expert on the mental health risk of abortion, recently provided evidence of dilemma which women go through as a consequence of abortion. She revealed that "women's cognitive abilities return to normal after abortion, often ushering in feelings of pronounced guilt, sadness, and regret."

This regret frequently centres on the question of whether the abortion did terminate a life that already existed. A report by a group of researchers referred to as the South Dakota Task Force to Study Abortion (Cited in Awake, 2009, p. 4) concluded that many pregnant women considering abortion "were misled into thinking that nothing but tissue was being removed, and relate that they would not have had an abortion if they were told the truth."

After an evaluation of the testimony of 1,940 women who had abortion, the study concluded that "many of these women are angered by grief at the loss of a child they were told never existed." The study added that the psychological harm of knowing she killed her child is often devastating."

On these issue of whether an unborn baby is merely some tissue or whether it is a living person while in the womb, Awake (2009) says opinion is considerably divided. Some believe that from the time of conception in the womb, the child is, not just another part of the mother's tissue, but a separate person. Her body views it as a foreign object. They believe it would be quickly rejected were it not for the protective housing created in the mother's womb. This new human life, separate from the mother, they contend, is a person with a unique DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) fingerprint.

Some others argue that a woman's body spontaneously aborts many fertilized eggs because of abnormalities. So, why should not a doctor be able to abort a pregnancy?, they ask. Notwithstanding, it must be clarified that there is a big difference between spontaneous death and deliberate homicide. For example, so many children die within their first year. But just because so many die prematurely would not make it acceptable to kill a child under the age of one.

A number of catholic priests, such as Rev. Frs. Dine, Nnamani, Okwor, Onah, and Omegoha (2006, p. 62) maintain that killing of a human being is prohibited in the Catholic Church. According to Dine et al. (2006, p. 43) not even one's own life is an individual

permitted to terminate, which implies that no one has the temerity to terminate the life of an unborn baby who is a human being by definition.

The foregoing arguments on abortion suggest that objections to abortion inducement are mainly anchored on moral grounds. In addition, the conflicting arguments between the church and the members of the society who hitherto are members of the church indicate conclusion that the attitudes of the clergy who are the leaders of the church and the laity who are followers may differ considerably. In the same manner, the fact that the Protestant Church separated from the Roman Catholic Church suggests that religious affiliation could play a role in the kind of attitude that their members hold in respect of a moral question like abortion.

As indicated previously, religious status is used in the present study to refer to the position maintained by the clergy and the lay persons in the church. The higher status persons are defined as the clergy who hold leadership position in the church, whereas the lower status persons are used to refer to the laity who hold followership position in the church. Similarly, religious affiliation is used to refer to an individual's religious denomination, namely, Catholic or Protestant Churches.

### **Purpose of Study**

The aim of the present study was to examine religious status and religious affiliation as factors on attitude on abortion. Two hypotheses were proposed and tested.

### **Hypotheses**

1. Religious status will not significantly affect attitudes on abortion.
2. Religious affiliation will not significantly affect attitudes on abortion.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The clergy, who were Reverend Fathers and Pastors of Catholic and Protestant Churches respectively and the laity, who were parents, in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State of Nigeria made up the sample for the study. Cluster sampling method was adopted to select the participants that took part in the study. This involved the use of the clergy and parents who attended meeting of the clergy and parents in Saint Theresa's Catholic Church and Saint Paul's Anglican Church in Nsukka. The number of clergy and laity that participated in the study was 200 (99 clergy and 101 laity). Of the 200 clergy and laity that took part in the study, 99 were Catholics and 101 were Protestants. The ages of the participants ranged from 30 to 69 years and their average age was 48.7 years.

Of the 99 who were Catholics, 53 were Reverend Fathers and 46 were parents (30 males and 16 females). Similarly, 46 of the 101 Protestants were Pastors, whereas 55 were parents (26 males and 29 females).

With regards to religious hierarchy, the higher status participants were the 99 Reverend Fathers and Pastors who constituted the clergy, whereas the lower status participants consisted of the 101 parents who made up the laity that formed parts of the congregations of the catholic and protestant churches.

The participants, that is, the clergy and the laity, were predominantly Igbo (Nigeria). The participants attended Catholic and Anglican Churches.

**Instrument**

Attitude to Abortion Scale (AAS) was used to gather data. Attitude to Abortion Scale (AAS), is a likert-form questionnaire that is composed of 15 items.

It requires a participant to show the extent to which the person agrees with each item by indicating: 5 = Strongly agree (SA); 4 = Agree (A); 3 = Fairly agree (FA); 2 = Disagree (D); or 1 = Strongly disagree (SA). Some of the items of the 15 – item questionnaire include, “Abortion is not moral and should be rejected”; “Abortion in all cases should be outlawed”; “Abortion should be encouraged to avoid teenage unwanted pregnancy”; “Abortion can be used as a means of birth control”; and “A woman should terminate a pregnancy when she is convinced that her life is threatened”.

**Validation**

The face validity and content validity of the instrument were verified. Four (4) teaching staff of the Department of Psychology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka rated the extent to which they thought the instrument could elicit accurate views of respondents towards abortion. Their ratings yielded an average of 80% agreement.

A pilot study was also conducted to determine the reliability of the instrument, Eighty (80) final year undergraduate students were used for the validation study. The item analysis of their responses showed a split-half reliability coefficient of .82 with the Gottman split-half reliability coefficient and Alpha of .81 with the Cronbach Alpha reliability test.

**Procedure**

Two hundred and fifty (250) copies of the AAS were distributed by two-research assistants to the participants in their churches. The researcher instructed the research assistants to make effort to retrieve the 250 questionnaires. Out of thee 250 copies, 50 were rejected because 21 were returned without filling them and 29 were incorrectly completed. The 200 copies judged to be correctly completed were used for the study.

The researcher elicited responses from the participants by requesting them to follow the standard procedure for responding to the items of the questionnaire and by assuring them of treating their responses with confidentiality. In addition, they were told that their responses would be used purposely for research. The instruction was as follows.

Please, carefully go through the questionnaire and honestly indicate your response by ticking (5) Strongly Agree (SA), (4) Agree (A), (3) Fairly Agree (A), (2) Disagree (D), or (1) Strongly Disagree (SD), as it represents your choice. Your responses will be treated with confidentiality and used for the purpose of the study.

No fixed time for responding to the questionnaire was given. Two research assistants collected the questionnaires as soon as the participants completed the questionnaires.

**Design/Statistics**

The design of this study was survey design. A 2-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for unequal sizes was used for data analysis.

**Result**

The following mean and standard deviation scores were computed for religious status and affiliation on abortion.

**Table I: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores on Religious Status and Affiliation.**

		Mean	Standard Deviation	Number of Participants
Status	Clergy	96.39	4.12	99
	Laity	78.95	12.14	101
Affiliation	Catholic	87.91	12.48	99
	Protestant	87.25	12.78	101

**Table II: Summary of ANOVA Table of Religious Status and Affiliation as Factors on Abortion**

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Status (A)	14622.26	1	14622.26	173.75*
Affiliation (B)	26.84	1	26.84	0.31 NS
A x B	4.71	1	4.71	0.05 NS
Error	15960.48	196	81.93	
<b>Total</b>	<b>30614.27</b>	<b>199</b>		

\*P < .01

Results of the 2-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) show that main effect of religious status was significant. However, main effect of religious affiliation and the interaction effect of religious status and affiliation were insignificant.

### Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the main effect of religious status on abortion was significant. Specifically, the result of the first hypothesis indicates that the attitudes of the higher status participants and the lower status participants significantly differed.

This result is in consonance with the findings of Adebayo and Nassif (1985). They discovered that religiosity affects the attitude of clergy towards abortion. According to these researchers, the clergy believe that those who practice abortion are those who have moral laxity and, as such, need spiritual intervention.

The result of this study also suggests that the issue of abortion is a cognitive question. Abortion appears to depend on one's perception. When an individual sees it as a moral issue, like the clergy did, the person is likely to discourage it; but when a person perceives it as a personal problem, like the laity did, the individual is likely to permit it. This notion is in agreement with the findings of Beck (1976) and Ellis (1997) who indicated that abortion is primarily influenced by perception or interpretation of the environment and the events that take place.

Similarly, the finding of the present study is in line with the results of Allgeier, Allgeier, and Rywick (1981). They interviewed 120 undergraduates who varied in sex guilt and sex knowledge. These students were requested to indicate the extent of their approval for abortion in response to case histories of applicants. The case histories were in terms of the circumstances under which conception had occurred. Results demonstrated that while sex knowledge registered little or no effect, sex guilty substantially affected abortion decisions. The investigators discussed the findings within the context of the debate over

morality of abortion and the problem of unwanted teenage pregnancy. They then suggested that sexual knowledge may have little impact on abortion related decisions.

Smetna's (1981) findings tend to agree with the results of the present study as well. Smetna (1981) believes that individuals taking abortion as a moral issue are likely to discourage termination of pregnancies, whereas those treating it as a personal issue are more likely to support abortion. He observed that moral responses to abortion interviews seem to be highly related to hypothetical moral judgement.

Nevertheless, the result of the present study is not in agreement with the findings of Noonan (1979). For example, Noonan (1979) suggested that abortion affects the structure of marriage and family, the role and duties of parents, the paternal contribution to procreation, and the virtues that characterize mothers. He conceptualizes that an absolute right to abortion poses a threat to family unity and harmony. However, the results of the present study show that parents do not see abortion as capable of truncating the harmony of the family. They rather appear to think that keeping an unwanted pregnancy may introduce jeopardy to the unity and harmony of the family.

Another finding of the present study was that the attitude of Catholics and Protestants on abortion did not significantly differ. Additionally, there was no significant interaction effect between religious status and affiliation. This means that whether a person is a catholic or a protestant does not impact on the views concerning abortion. What seem to have enough influence on the views of individuals on abortion are whether a person sees abortion as a moral issue or a personal question, and the prevailing circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, the results of the present study indicate that religious status has significant effect on the views of individuals on abortion, whereas religious affiliation as a factor on abortion has no noticeable impact.

This finding is interpreted to suggest that mere sexual knowledge is not enough to restrain people from obtaining abortion. Rather it is moral judgement which "ushers in feelings of pronounced guilt, sadness, and regret" (Coleman, 2009), that affect people's abortion related decisions. The results of this study thus provide counsellors increased insight into the perception of abortion candidates and how to render help to them. For example, it appears clinically fruitful to train the conscience of abortion candidates rather than to provide them with increased sexual knowledge. In the course of doing this, abortion candidates are made to consider abortion as a homicide case, a repudiation of the universal law that says "thou shall not kill."

However, few problems were encountered in the course of carrying out this study that may limit the generalizeability of the results to the entire population. For example, a number of participants did not fill out the questionnaire. In addition some questionnaires were not properly filled. To make matters worse, many of the parents were not literate enough to handle the completion of the questionnaires with minimum assistance. For these reasons, the sample was limited to 200 (99 clergy and 101 laity). It is not clear whether the number of participants is enough to permit generalization of the results to the entire population. Another draw back of this work is that the participants were drawn from one local government area. Moreover, only clergy and parents were used. Spinsters and bachelors were not included in the study.

In sum, the number of participants used in the study was not sufficient to allow generalization to the entire population. It is suggested that future investigators should

include more participants to secure more valid generalization of the results. Additionally, the sample for the study should be drawn from a wider area, such as state or geopolitical zone, in order to obtain more information concerning abortion. Again, future researchers should include spinsters and bachelors, because one can learn a lot from the views of this sub-group.

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