



PSYCHOLOGY IN THE EYE OF THE PUBLIC: A NATIONAL SURVEY ON PERCEPTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Public perception is an important matter to every profession because it determines action, relevance in the scheme of things and the direction of public policies. Studies that investigated public perception of psychology in Nigeria are very scanty and most were conducted several decades ago. This study explored the public perceptions of psychology in Nigeria. Participants were 2,027 literate Nigerians randomly selected across the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. Participants' mean age was 30.9 (SD = 11.5). Of the 2,027 participants, 1089 (55.4%) were males and 876 (44.6%) were females. Psychologists were excluded from participating in the survey but 42.6% of the participants had attended at least a psychology class while in school. Results showed that participants were reasonably knowledgeable about psychology and perceived psychologists positively, although the perceptions are fraught with some inaccuracies and misperceptions. About 85% of respondents perceived psychology to be a scientific discipline; 62% agreed that psychologists are needed in Nigeria; and 76% agreed that psychologists can contribute to national development. Majority of respondents perceived psychologists as most suitably qualified in solving marital conflict, ethnic distrust, attitudinal problems, pathological gambling, emotional problems, cigarette smoking and addiction problems. However, psychologists were rated lower than other professionals (except psychiatrists) with regards to how valuable professionals are to the society. The study concluded that, for the public to value psychologists more, the business of psychology must be conducted with thorough professionalism. The need for professional self-policing was also emphasized.

INTRODUCTION

Debate about the status of psychology as a discipline and as a science has remained contentious since the emergence of the discipline till present, and the public perception of psychology, especially in Nigeria has remained largely vague and misconstrued. It has been argued that psychological science is experiencing a public perception problem that has been caused by both public misconceptions about psychology, as well as the psychological science community's failure to distinguish itself from pseudoscience and questionable therapeutic practices (Ferguson, 2015; Lilienfeld, 2012). These misperceptions are prevalent even in the Western countries where psychology is better accepted and psychological services are routinely provided. For instance, most Americans could not accurately distinguish among the various mental health professionals such as between psychologists and psychotherapists, or between psychologists and psychiatrists (Lilienfeld, 2012). Similarly, beliefs held by many lay people in United Kingdom show a lack of accurate knowledge about the duties/roles of psychologists (Cusimano & Goodwin, 2019). In several countries, beliefs held about psychology were associated with what the media portrays psychology to be (Ferguson, 2015; Okoloba & Ogueji, 2020). Since the advent of psychology in Nigeria, traceable to 1964 when it was introduced as a social science discipline at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Obot & Gire, 1995), many people do not seem to believe that psychology is a science and it has remained one of the most misunderstood disciplines studied in Nigeria (Okoloba & Ogueji, 2020).

Apart from the general public, scientists in the psychological sphere have equally been unsparing in raising critical questions regarding the methodology and practice of psychology, especially with regards to the claim of a therapeutic discipline for which psychology has come to be known. Ojiji (2015) assessed the fifty years of psychology in Nigeria and posed a fundamental question which centered on whether psychology in Nigeria is taught and practiced as a science or merely put together as a folktale. Failure to satisfactorily answer this question in the affirmative, according to him, may not project the discipline positively in the public sphere. In Nigeria, research into the public perceptions of psychologists is lacking in vital areas, especially what the public currently believes about the roles of psychologists and efficacy of psychological interventions. Empirical insights into such areas could elucidate cognitive mechanisms involved in the acceptance of professional psychological intervention and research findings from psychologists.

Prompted by the widespread misconceptions about psychology in Nigeria, Olomolaiye (1985) charged Nigerian psychologists to educate Nigerians on what psychology is and what psychologists do. Olomolaiye also enjoined Nigerian psychologists to "remove from the minds of Nigerians the conception of psychology as an abstract discipline. ..." (p. 343). Njoku (2012) also advocated for a shift in paradigm with a view toward correcting the misleading but commonly held perception that psychology is only for the classroom. As reported by Obot (1994), while lay people see psychology as a profound mystery, practitioners and researchers strive to

project the discipline as making useful contributions in many areas, including the training of future doctors among others (Obot, 1994). Mefoh (2019) observed that several attempts, aimed at reeducation of the public on the subject matter of psychology and on what psychologists do, have been made (Ebigbo, 1985; Eyo, 1999; Obot, 1988; Ojiji, 2011; Uzoka, 1989).

The issues surrounding scientific psychology in Nigeria have generated robust contributions from researchers and practitioners (e.g. Ebigbo, 1981; Gire, 2004; Nweze, 2007; Obot, 1993; 1994) with a view to stimulating more evidence-based approaches and perspectives to the practice of psychology in Nigeria, mitigating the inadequacies and possibly re-directing the teaching and practice of psychology in such a way as to properly market psychology as a scientific discipline to members of the public, and demonstrating the utility of psychology in the public interest. The problem of misperceptions surrounding psychologist in Nigeria became a matter of serious concern that the theme of the 2019 Annual Congress of the Nigerian Psychological Association (NPA 2019) – “Psychology in the Public Interest” - was specifically chosen to demonstrate the utility of psychology as a public interest discipline and to identify areas of misperceptions and possible mitigation strategies.

The debate about psychology has been made more complex because the arguments have not only centered on what psychology is, but also on whether there is a specific African psychology in relation to psychological practice (Idemudia, 2015). Eyo (1999), based on the mixed views of Nigerians about psychology, highlighted the Nigerian situation as a

mixture of how psychology has been used and how it has been abused by practitioners and laypersons as well as the prospects for its advancement. Another factor adduced for the misconception of psychology in Nigeria is the lack of familiarity of the subject matter by the public. For instance, other social science subjects such as economics, geography, and civic studies are taught at the secondary school level, whereas psychology is taught only at the tertiary level, where only students who are admitted to study psychology or education, law, medicine, business and other ancillary disciplines are introduced to the so called ‘abstract’ subject in partial fulfillment for their programmes. Other problems include cultural comparisons of psychological environments among nations as well as poor language equivalents for psychological terminologies and contents (Mayer, 2002). In a recent study, Ogueiji and Constantine-Simms (2019) surveyed the views of Nigerians in Lagos about what clinical psychology is and what role it could play in the health care system (Ogueiji & Constantine-Simms, 2019). It was found that participants expressed a lot of inaccurate views about what clinical psychology represents (Ogueiji & Constantine-Simms, 2019). Boski (1983), in a study of person perception in Nigeria in the context of ethnicity, self and other attributions for achievement-related outcomes among Nigerian undergraduates, found significant ethnic differences in the appreciation of psychology.

It has also been noted that misperceptions about psychology and psychologists can be described as self-inflicted wounds (Lilienfeld, 2012) arising from lack of self-policing mechanism on the part of psychologists and non-adherence to strict scientific

standard in psychological practice (Baker et al., 2009; Freiheit, Vye et al., 2004; Hess et al., 2008; Kessler et al., 2001; Russell & Silver, 2007; Teo, 2012). This is especially the case in many settings in Nigeria. There have been calls for an enabling legislation to regulate training and practice of psychology in Nigeria, and to checkmate quackery in the profession (Abikoye et al., 2020; Makanju, 2017). As noted by Abikoye et al. (2020), the absence of an enabling law to regulate the profession and practice of psychology in Nigeria has not only exacerbated the consequences of the absence of professional self-policing, it has also given rise to an uncontrollable proliferation of the psychology space in Nigeria by quacks and pseudo-psychologists. The seeming helplessness in regulating activities of practitioners in Nigeria has not, even, been substantially mitigated by the publication and circulation of the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (Nigerian Psychological Association, 2018) because the legal framework to enforce the code and sanction errant members is still not in place.

Why should we be concerned about public perceptions of psychology in Nigeria? Acceptance of intervention, policies, and other profession-related outcomes depend on how the general public perceives a discipline and how persuasive they hold “scientific evidence” emanating therefrom. Public perceptions determine action, relevance in the scheme of things, allocation of funding resources and the direction of public policies. People view different professional disciplines as having varying degrees of scientific tenets and veracity, which may actually be at variance with realities of the field. Perceived accuracy is not necessarily the same as

actual accuracy, and error of judgement in perception can lead to dangerous choices. For instance, in a recent survey, psychology was perceived as the least precise of the various disciplines investigated while forensics was perceived as the most precise (Broomell & Kane, 2017). We know, however, that forensics is plagued with many of the same uncertainties that involve predicting human behavior with limited evidence, like psychology.

One of the first systematic attempts aimed at gauging public perception of psychologists in Nigeria was undertaken by Obot (1993). Researchers (e.g. Gire, 2004; Mefoh, 2014; Nweze, 2007; Obot, 1994) have also examined other issues relating to psychology in the public sphere. However, most of these previous studies were historical perspectives and even the ones that were empirical investigations (e.g. Boski, 1983; Obot, 1993, 1994) were conducted almost three decades ago. Given the importance of understanding how the public perceives psychology/ psychologists in Nigeria in the face of modern realities, there is need for a national survey in this direction. Findings of this study should help shape the direction of psychology in Nigeria with a view to aligning the discipline with current trends and global best practices so as to remain relevant in making necessary impacts nationally and internationally.

Based on the foregoing, the aim of this study was to examine public perceptions of psychology and psychologists in Nigeria. First, the study investigated knowledge and perceptions of what psychology is and who psychologists are. Second, the study explored what respondents perceived to be the

specific functions of psychologists, relative to other professionals (Teachers/Educationists, Lawyers, Medical Doctors, Psychiatrists) and which, among the various professional groups they thought was best suited or most qualified in handling a list of social problems. The study also gauged respondents' relative valuation of psychologists and other professionals groups (Engineers, Lawyers, Medical Doctors, Nurses, Psychiatrists and Teachers) in terms of importance to the society. We hypothesized that people's valuation of psychologists would vary across geopolitical zones because psychologists/departments of psychology (academic and applied) are not evenly spread across Nigeria. From available records at the Secretariat of NPA, the zones with a preponderance of psychologists in Nigeria are the South-West, South-East and North-Central. It is expected that people from these zones would have better appreciation of psychology than people from the other three zones with scanty psychological presence. It is also expected that individuals who had been exposed to psychology (as a general or foundational course in most tertiary institutions in Nigeria) should have a better appreciation of the discipline compared to those without such exposure. We, therefore, explored how valuable to society people considered psychologists to be according to geo-political zone and by prior exposure to psychology (respondents who had taken at least a course in psychology before versus those who had never taken a course in psychology before).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 2,027 literate Nigerians randomly selected from six Nigerian cities in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. A State was chosen from each of the six geo-political zones. Participants' mean age was 30.9 (SD = 11.5). Of the 2,027 participants, 1089 (55.4%) were males and 876 (44.6%) were females. Respondents consisted of 983 civil servants (48.5%) and 1044 university students (51.5%). Psychologists were excluded from participating in the survey but 42.6% had attended at least a psychology class while in school while 57.4% never attended a psychology class.

Design and Measures

A structured, four-sectioned questionnaire was used for data collection in this cross-sectional survey. The first section consisted of a 29-item perception of psychology/psychologists scale. Developed by the researchers in the course of this study, the scale is scored along a 5-point scale with options ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5) and with higher scores denoting more favourable perceptions. The scale was subjected to content validation method and was shown to be valid. A Coefficient alpha of 0.78 was obtained for the scale.

In the second section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate which of the five professional groups (Teacher/Educationist, Lawyer, Medical Doctor, Psychiatrist, Psychologists) they thought was best suited or qualified in handling 21 different problems, such as marital conflicts, ethnic mistrust, community violence in Nigeria, attitudinal problems, children's poor school performance, excessive alcohol consumption, pathological

gambling, etc. Respondents were to select only one professional group for each problem.

In order to gauge respondents' relative valuation of psychologists and other professionals, seven professional groups (Engineers, Lawyers, Medical Doctors, Nurses, Psychiatrists, Psychologists, and Teachers) were listed, and respondents were asked to rate each on a four-point scale ranging from "Very Valuable" to "Not-Valuable at All".

Finally, respondents' socio-demographic information – age, sex, occupational status, previous exposure to psychology, course of study and level of study in the university (for students only), were assessed in the last section of the questionnaire.

Procedure

A university city was purposively selected from each of the six geo-political zones of Nigeria: Makurdi from North Central, Gashua from North East, Kaduna from North West, Nsukka from South East, Uyo from South-South and Ibadan from South West. Each of the cities has at least one university. A Senior-level psychologist was appointed to coordinate data collection in each city. Data was collected by administering questionnaires personally to respondents. A total of 2,400 questionnaires were distributed (400 per city) over a three-week period; 2,027 were returned with usable data: 306 (15.1%) from Makurdi, 220 (10.9%) from Gashua, 402 (19.8%) from Kaduna, 295 (14.6%) from Nsukka, 417 (20.6%) from Uyo and 387 (19.1%) from Ibadan. This represented an 84.5% return rate.

RESULTS

Participants were asked to respond to statements about psychology and psychologists. A

summary of their responses are presented in Table 1. Results indicated that participants had mixed perceptions regarding who psychologists are, what they do and the methods they adopt, ranging from fairly accurate perceptions about psychology and psychologists to outright misconceptions. For instance, about 85% of respondents perceived (agreed/strongly agreed) psychology to be a scientific discipline while only 7% disagreed or strongly disagreed with that notion. About 62% of respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement that "we do not need psychologists in Nigeria" while about 29% agreed / strongly agreed with the statement. More than 76% of respondents agreed / strongly agreed that "psychologists can contribute to national development" while about 9% disagreed / strongly disagreed. Likewise, about 57% of respondents agreed / disagreed that "psychologists conduct sensitive research on national security". Also, about 70% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that "psychologists help the police to investigate crimes" while 15% disagreed/strongly disagreed. It is also interesting that about 59% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that "psychologists help resolve conflicts among people and nations" while 17% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Responses also indicated some misperceptions or unfavorable perceptions by majority of respondents. For instance, as high as 66% of respondents agreed / strongly agreed that "psychologists read people's minds", over 40% agreed / strongly agreed that "psychologists use pseudoscientific methods", about 37% agreed / strongly agreed that "psychologists engage in metaphysical matters" while about 37% agreed /

strongly agreed that “psychologists are Jacks of all trades”.

Table 1: Perceptions of psychology / psychologists (%)

SN	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Psychology is a scientific discipline	51.3	33.8	7.9	4.2	2.8
2	We do not need psychologists in Nigeria	10.2	19.1	9.0	29.0	32.8
3	Psychologists can contribute to national development	31.2	45.4	13.8	5.9	3.7
4	Psychologists are “Jacks of all trades”	12.9	24.4	20.5	28.0	14.2
5	Psychologists read peoples’ minds	32.3	34.1	16.9	10.7	6.0
6	Psychologists treat people with mental illness	23.5	31.6	23.0	15.3	6.5
7	Psychologists as people not to be trusted	11.7	14.6	16.4	34.5	22.8
8	Psychologists search for the causes of human behaviour	35.5	40.2	14.2	6.3	3.9
9	I can’t allow my child to study psychology	13.1	17.1	14.5	25.8	29.6
10	Psychologists give advice on healthy living	21.9	46.3	18.4	9.9	3.6
11	Psychologists can predict people’s behavior	33.3	41.7	15.7	7.2	2.1
12	Psychologists can help people choose the right occupation	22.7	34.0	22.6	13.8	6.8
13	Psychologists can serve as expert witness in the court	22.4	36.9	21.1	14.7	4.9
14	Psychologists engage in metaphysical matters	13.2	33.6	23.1	17.8	12.3
15	Psychologists help government to formulate social policies	19.4	34.9	24.0	14.1	7.6
16	Psychologists do not believe in the existence of God	12.8	16.2	16.5	26.4	28.1
17	Psychologists participate in training soldiers/police	21.8	34.2	19.5	13.5	11.0
18	Psychologists help those who have marital problems	28.1	39.6	19.5	7.9	4.9
19	Psychologists help in the treatment of addiction	34.8	36.7	15.4	9.6	3.5
20	Psychologists help the police investigate crimes	30.1	39.7	15.1	9.2	5.8
21	Psychologists conduct research on national security	21.3	37.0	22.4	13.5	5.8
22	Psychologists are not scientists	12.9	21.3	18.5	27.0	20.2
23	Psychologists use pseudoscientific methods	14.6	37.4	25.7	14.7	7.7
24	Psychology is not a profession	10.4	11.1	13.1	28.8	36.7
25	Psychologists participate in design/marketing of products	23.9	25.7	17.9	19.1	13.4
26	Psychologists conduct research on mental illness	33.3	42.2	16.0	5.9	2.6
27	Psychologists strive to change people’s behaviours	36.6	40.9	15.2	4.6	2.6
28	I think psychologists prescribe drugs for treatment	13.8	24.8	20.6	22.1	18.7
29	Psychologists help resolve conflicts among people/nations	21.9	37.6	23.5	10.2	6.8

NB: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

With a view to exploring what respondents perceived to be the specific functions of psychologists, relative to other professionals, respondents were asked to indicate which of the five professional groups (Teacher / Educationist, Lawyer, Medical Doctor, Psychiatrist, Psychologists) they thought was best suited or qualified in handling 21 different problems. Results indicated that majority of respondents rated psychologists as most suited to solving the following problems: marital conflict (57.5%), ethnic distrust (40.7%), attitudinal problems (55.5%), pathological gambling (50.7%), emotional problems (60.9%), smoking (39.5%), difficulty in coping with life (62.8%), handling difficult children (41.8%), difficulty getting along with people (62%), work-related conflicts (47.4%), excessive worry and anxiety (51.1%), religious extremism (42.4) and self-centeredness (58.6%). However, it is interesting that majority of the respondents did not perceive psychologists to be best suited in handling some otherwise psychology-related roles such as children’s poor school

performance (25.1%), choosing an occupation (36.8%), excessive alcohol consumption (38.4%), inability to sleep (27.4%), overweight or obesity (17.5%), child abuse (30.1%), and terrorism (32.6%).

Table 2: Professionals best suited in handling specific problems in Nigeria (%)

SN	Specific problems	Teacher	Lawyer	Medical Doctor	Psychiatrist	Psychologist
1	Marital conflict	15.7	20.3	2.9	3.6	57.5
2	Ethnic distrust	23.5	30.2	2.8	2.7	40.7
3	Community violence in Nigeria	14.6	42.1	3.2	3.1	37.0
4	Attitudinal problems	17.5	7.4	4.2	15.4	55.5
5	Poor school performance	62.9	3.7	4.8	3.5	25.1
6	Choosing an occupation	48.2	4.2	5.8	5.0	36.8
7	Excessive alcohol consumption	6.4	3.7	39.5	12.1	38.4
8	Pathological gambling	7.2	8.3	16.3	17.5	50.7
9	Emotional problems	5.6	5.6	11.4	16.5	60.9
10	Smoking	6.6	3.9	36.1	13.8	39.5
11	Difficulty coping with life	12.6	3.8	8.5	12.1	62.8
12	Handling difficult children	39.4	4.8	5.8	8.0	41.8
13	Difficulty getting along	14.6	6.5	5.4	11.5	62.0
14	Work-related conflicts	14.6	24.0	6.7	7.3	47.4
15	Excessive worry and anxiety	5.9	5.6	22.9	14.5	51.1
16	Inability to sleep	4.5	5.0	51.8	11.3	27.4
17	Overweight or obesity	5.2	8.1	61.2	8.0	17.5
18	Child abuse	13.4	35.8	13.4	7.3	30.1
19	Terrorism	11.4	42.9	4.6	8.5	32.6
20	Religious extremism	22.0	22.2	5.3	8.1	42.4
21	Self-centeredness	15.7	8.5	4.4	12.8	58.6

In order to gauge respondents' relative valuation of psychologists and other professionals, seven professional groups (Engineers, Lawyers, Medical Doctors, Nurses, Psychiatrists, Psychologists, and Teachers) were listed, and respondents were asked to rate each on a four-point scale ranging from "Very Valuable" to "Not-Valuable at All". The results are presented in Table 3. Results indicated that, overall, the most highly valued professionals were Medical doctors (88.9%), Teachers (87.2%), Engineers (80.0%), Lawyers (71.6%), Nurses (66.3%), Psychologists (62.7%) and Psychiatrists (51.2%).

S/N	Professional	Very Valuable	Fairly Valuable	Not Too Valuable	Not Valuable At All
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		n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
1	Engineers	1612	80.0	298	14.9	76	3.8	13	0.7
2	Lawyers	1450	71.6	441	21.8	117	5.8	17	0.8
3	Medical Doctors	1800	88.9	167	8.2	44	2.2	14	0.7
4	Nurses	1343	66.3	543	26.8	115	5.7	26	1.3
5	Psychiatrists	1037	51.2	602	29.7	309	15.2	79	3.9
6	Psychologists	1270	62.7	491	24.2	213	10.5	53	2.6
7	Teachers	1767	87.2	160	7.9	75	3.7	25	1.2

Table 3: Perceived valuation of professional groups to the society

We had cause to opine that people's valuation of psychologists would vary across geopolitical zones. Results in Table 4 indicated that respondents' valuations of various professionals (except Engineers) varied significantly by geopolitical zone. For psychologists, 92.2% of respondents from the South-West perceived psychologists as valuable ("very valuable" + "fairly valuable"), followed by the South-East (91.5%), North-East (91.4%), North-Central (86.9%), South-South (81.5%) and North-West (81.3%).

Results indicated that respondents' valuation of psychologists varied slightly by prior exposure to the discipline (Table 5). While 90.3% of respondents who had taken at least a psychology course perceived psychologists as valuable ("highly valuable" + "fairly valuable"), 84.3% of respondents with no prior exposure to psychology held similar views. Conversely, while 9.7% of respondents with prior exposure to psychology perceived psychologists as not valuable to society ("Not too valuable" + "Not valuable at all"), 15.7% of respondents without exposure to psychology perceived psychologists as not valuable to society.

Table 4: Perceived valuation of professional groups to the society by geo-political zone

Professio	Perceived	Geo-political Zones						Total	X ²
		North	North	North	South	South	South		

nal	Valuation	East	Central	West	West	East	South		
Engineers	V. Valuable	174	233	313	338	226	328	1612	
	F. Valuable	36	45	66	43	42	66	298	
	NT Valuable	9	11	19	6	12	19	76	19.70
	NVA	1	3	4	0	1	4	13	p n.s.
	Total	220	292	402	387	281	417	1999	
Lawyers	V. Valuable	144	209	282	319	200	296	1450	
	F. Valuable	53	69	96	60	66	97	441	46.88
	NT Valuable	19	22	23	7	23	23	117	p<.01
	NVA	4	5	1	1	5	1	17	
	Total	220	305	402	387	294	417	2025	
Medical Doctors	V. Valuable	189	252	368	362	246	383	1800	68.84
	F. Valuable	28	29	25	20	40	25	167	p<.01
	NT Valuable	2	20	5	5	7	5	44	
	NVA	1	4	4	0	1	4	14	
	Total	220	305	402	387	294	417	2025	
Nurses	V. Valuable	169	209	261	222	208	274	1343	
	F. Valuable	39	68	110	142	73	111	543	49.65
	NT Valuable	8	21	27	22	9	28	115	p<.01
	NVA	4	8	4	1	5	4	26	
	Total	220	306	402	387	295	417	2027	
Psychiatrists	V. Valuable	130	167	188	191	162	199	1037	
	F. Valuable	70	81	130	99	90	132	602	50.22
	NT Valuable	16	44	61	87	38	63	309	p<.01
	NVA	4	14	23	10	5	23	79	
	Total	220	306	402	387	295	417	2027	
Psychologists	V. Valuable	147	187	226	284	187	239	1270	
	F. Valuable	54	79	101	73	83	101	491	69.80
	NT Valuable	16	23	63	25	22	64	213	p<.01
	NVA	3	17	12	5	3	13	53	
	Total	220	306	402	387	295	417	2027	
Teachers	V. Valuable	204	248	368	313	251	383	1767	
	F. Valuable	12	25	22	49	30	22	160	92.14
	NT Valuable	2	17	10	24	12	10	75	p<.01
	NVA	2	16	2	1	2	2	25	
	Total	220	306	402	387	295	417	2027	

NB: Psychiatrists = Psychiatrists, Psychologists = Psychologists, V. Valuable = Very Valuable, F. Valuable = Fairly Valuable, NT Valuable = Not too Valuable, NVA = Not Valuable at all.

Table 5: Valuation of psychologists by “ever taken a course in psychology before”

Valuation	Ever taken a course in Psychology before?		Total	X ²
	Yes	No		
Very Valuable	588	656	1244	
Fairly Valuable	176	307	483	32.47
Not Too Valuable	63	145	208	p<.01
Not Valuable at all	19	34	53	
Total	846	1142	1988	

DISCUSSION

The study investigated public perceptions of psychology and psychologists in Nigeria. We found

that a majority of respondents were reasonably knowledgeable about psychology/psychologists and the roles that they play. This interesting finding

shows that more people in the society are getting to know about psychology, an indication that, though there is need to do more in terms of concerted effort to positively market psychology in the public domain, the situation is not as gloomy now as earlier portrayed by Ferguson (2015), Lilienfeld (2012) and Ojiji (2015).

We found, however, that knowing what psychology is and having an accurate idea of what psychologists do and how they do those things represent different things entirely. Findings indicated that respondents' knowledge about psychology/psychologists is tainted with misperceptions or unfavorable perceptions (Ogueiji & Constantine-Simms, 2019). For instance, about two-thirds of respondents perceived that psychologists read people's minds while almost a half perceived that psychologists use methods that are not scientific. These misperceptions, arising mainly from methodological concerns and lack of proper professional regulation, appear to be consistent with the concerns raised by Abikoye et al. (2020), Lilienfeld (2012), and Ojiji (2015). Members of the public, though not psychologist, have a fair idea of how scientific disciplines should operate and what constitutes evidence-based professional practice – laboratories or/and other testing apparatus, thorough examinations, rigorous training regimens for practitioners before certification, measurable treatment outcomes. Failure to conduct activities in line with pre-conceived notion of professionalism can easily lead to a perception that the professional is engaged in guesswork, trial-and-error or outright quackery. It is also possible that the proliferation of non-psychologists in the psychological space in

Nigeria has contributed to these perceptions that psychological practice is lacking in scientific and methodological rigor.

We also found that though the majority of respondents appeared to know that psychologists are appropriately suited to solving diverse societal problems, it was also evident that this perception of competency to handle societal problems is wrongly placed in several domains. For instance, majority of respondents in the study did not situate the competency to handle issues relating to children's poor school performance, occupational/vocational choice, excessive alcohol consumption, sleep problems, weight problems or obesity, child abuse and terroristic behavior in psychologists. Whereas, psychologists, ideally, can best handle these above-listed problems, a majority of respondents seemed to think otherwise. This could be due to the issue of professionalism and failure to positively market psychologists' competences and potentials in Nigeria, where most psychologists are associated with the classroom and very few are found in the applied settings (Mefoh, 2014; Njoku, 2012; Ojiji, 2015).

With regards to how valuable psychologists are to the society, findings indicated that although majority of respondents perceived psychologists to be valuable, other professionals (Engineers, Lawyers, Medical Doctors, Nurses and Teachers) are perceived to be of greater values to society. The only professionals that were considered less valuable than psychologists were psychiatrists. Our conjecture regarding the relatively lower valuation of psychologists and psychiatrists is the association of these two professionals with mental health (or

“mad people”, in common, lay persons’ language). Many are oblivious of the diverse roles that psychologists play in virtually all areas of human endeavors. To people in many parts of Nigeria, psychologists (especially clinical psychologists) and psychiatrists are, simply, “people who treat mad people”. Many even believe that dealing with psychologically disturbed people can be contagious. It is plausible; therefore, that these stereotyped roles of psychologists have substantially shaped people’s valuation of the discipline and the professionals.

Findings indicated that the respondents from the geo-political zones with more psychologists and academic or applied departments of psychology (South-West, South-East and North-Central) valued psychologist more than the zones where there are relatively fewer psychologists. Although Boski (1983) attributed geographical variations in peoples’ perceptions about psychology to the issue of cultural interpretations, we are of the view that the variations could be due to more exposure to psychologists or psychological services. In other words, the more interactions that people have with psychologists, the better their appreciation of the discipline and the professionals. The need for more psychologists and psychological centers in the South-South, North-East and North-West geo-political zones cannot be overemphasized.

Interestingly, we found that prior exposure to psychology made only a little difference in how valuable people considered psychologists to be. We had expected prior exposure to psychology to make a huge difference in people’s perception. This finding may be due to psychological contents that are not stimulating enough or ineffectiveness of

lecture delivery by psychologists. This finding underlies the need for more robust and relevant pedagogical contents as well as a more interesting, practical instructional approach in the teaching of psychology in Nigeria.

Based on findings of the present study, it is concluded that the average Nigerian has a good idea of who a psychologist is and what a psychologist does. Also public perception of psychology/psychologists in Nigeria is positive, although tainted with some inaccuracies probably arising from limited knowledge of the discipline and deeply-held stereotypes. Overall, psychologists are highly valued in Nigeria, although not on the same levels as other professionals like Engineers, Lawyers, Medical Doctors (except psychiatrists), Nurses and Teachers. While psychologists are not in competition with these other professionals, it is misleading to perceive psychologists as less valuable. Effort to correct such misperceptions must start from psychologists. Psychologists must conduct the business of psychology professionally and must be seen to be doing so. In this regard, the need for professional self-policing cannot be overemphasized. People will not perceive psychologists as professionals if every member does as he/she wishes without institutional mechanisms to guide, direct and sanction, if the need arises.

For a number of reasons, caution should be applied in generalizing the findings and conclusions of the study. Respondents in the present study are literate Nigerians that may not necessarily typify the average Nigeria. Findings may, therefore, not be generalizable to the illiterate and semi-illiterate Nigerians. The study was conducted in urban,

university cities across Nigeria, with almost 50% of respondents having taken at least a psychology course in the past. Perceptions of psychologists by rural dwellers and people who never attended a university are likely to be markedly different. As with all non-experimental methods, findings of the present survey are limited because causation as well as direction of causality cannot be inferred. An experimental approach, in which variables were actively manipulated and study conditions properly controlled, would have provided a more persuasive test of the hypotheses. Nevertheless, these limitations are not strong enough to vitiate the important findings of the study and their implications for the psychology profession in Nigeria.

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