

Chapter 15

The Concepts of Academic Humility and Seniority in Scholarship: A Critique of Research Traditions in Nigerian Universities

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ABSTRACT

The concept of academic humility has often been ill-defined or ill-conceived by members of the Nigerian academia. It argues that this concept has objectionably been associated – nay confused – with “academic subservience”, “academic hypocrisy”, “false modesty” and “yesmanism”. Such misconception could partially be attributed to the prevalence of the “seniority syndrome”. In effect, the seniority syndrome has often wanted that pertinence be ascribed unto a research idea or thesis not necessarily on account of the robustness of the methodology that led to its enunciation, but principally on account of the “seniority” (credentials) of the researcher who authors the thesis or idea in question. This tendency has generally stemmed from the faulty assumption that a senior researcher is theoretically more knowledgeable than his or her junior counterparts; and that the “junior researcher” must manifest unconditional reverence for his or her senior colleagues. This scenario is most often observed during Ph.D. these defenses and similar forums aimed at evaluating research in Nigerian universities.

INTRODUCTION

From conceptualization to publication/dissemination of scholarship, research is guided by a wide range of cannons and ethical principles. Some of these principles and cannons include, academic honesty, objectivism, professionalism, contribution to knowledge and/or profession and academic humility among others. These principles and traditions generally govern specific levels of the research process. Academic honesty and objectivity for instance mainly shape methodological designing; while profes-

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sionalism guides the conceptualization process. In tandem with this, academic humility is mainly required at the publication or dissemination of research results. It is a pillar in the performance of the researcher, particularly in such forums as research conferences, workshops, seminars, thesis defense and other research-related oral exercises. Academic humility is therefore supposed to be a cardinal aspect of the researcher's personality (Kaplan, 2013; O'Leary, 2016; Straits et al., 2012; University of Otago, 2011). Adedemeji (2013) presents it as the trait of "true" and "genuine" scholars. It is an ethical value or scholarly behavior which ought to be reflected in the latter's research ideas as well as in his or her approaches to selling and defending these ideas.

However, academic humility has proven to be very elusive in nature, particularly among Nigerian researchers. This is not unconnected to the fact that the phenomenon of "humility" itself, has often been found semantically sleepery and contextually equivocal. As Worthington (2007) insightfully argues, irrespective of the context in which it is used, the concept of humility raises a number of paradoxes. Its virtuous nature is subject to personal or individual conceptions. Using the American experience, Worthington further posits that though most people think of humility as a personal psychological strength, research has demonstrated that humility is not equally valued in all people.

People say they must value humility within religious seekers; the same people do not value humility quite as much when it is shown in a close partner or close friend. Studies show that Americans are least accepting of humility in leaders, yet even here they seem divided. Some people surveyed say they want their leaders to have outspoken confidence, bordering on arrogance; others say they prefer for their leaders to have almost saintly humility. So, is humility a virtue? Well, it depends on who you ask. (Worthington, 2007, p.4)

Furthermore, the phenomenon of humility exemplifies concepts that are difficult, if not impossible to scientifically study. In Worthington's language, a growing body of research on humility is susceptible to help researchers and other professionals to be more humble. However, research suggests that there are limits to what science can tell us about humility.

In Nigeria in particular, the concept of academic humility has often been ill-defined or ill-conceived within academic and intellectual environments. This concept has objectionably been associated – nay confused – with "academic subservience", "academic hypocrisy", "false modesty" and "yesmanism" (the tendency of being a yes man). This could partially be attributed to the prevalence of the "seniority syndrome". In effect, the seniority syndrome has often motivated many members of the Nigerian academia to ascribe pertinence unto research ideas, a theory or a thesis, not necessarily on account of the robustness of the methodology that led to its enunciation, but principally on account of the "seniority" (academic title and years of experience) of the person who authors the thesis, theory or idea in question. This tendency has generally followed the faulty assumption/ axiom that a veteran (senior in the domain of research) is theoretically and "infallibly" more knowledgeable and more experienced than his/her junior counterparts; and that the "junior researcher" must, in all situations show or manifest unconditional respect towards his senior colleague by taking the latter's "dictation" on the research issue being raised (Agu, Omenyi & Odimegwu 2015; Balarabe 2009; Olayinka 2014). This questionable trend has visibly been in line with the African traditionalism current which among other tenets, exalts unconditional respect for elders and authorities in all social contexts.

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