

**PERSONALITY AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA: A PSYCHOLOGICAL  
EXPLORATION OF THE AGENTIC THEORY OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Personality and politics in Nigeria: a psychological exploration of the agentic theory of political participation Many scholars (e.g Nwagboso & Duke, 2012; Lawal & Owolabi, 2012) have pointed to leadership as the pivot of all political problems facing Nigeria. Other scholars who pointed to followership (e.g. Ogbonna, Ogundiwin & Uzuegbu-Wilson, 2012) concentrated on the masses, exclusively regarded as “followers”. This paper observes that every Nigerian citizen is a follower in one or more capacities. This paper contends that the obvious political impasse experienced by Nigerians is predicated upon a faulty political orientation characterised by a sense of self-detachment to the undemocratic activities performed in favor of recalcitrant power brokers. This paper suggests that a sense of political accountability, responsibility and public confidence will only return when the political office holders genuinely uphold integrity, transparency and the value for individual differences, and when the bulk of the electorates, on the other hand, acquire meaningful political education and sincerely demonstrate that power belongs to the people.*

**Introduction**

The nature of some recent political engagements in Nigeria has put a big question mark on the essence of government in human society. From the elementary knowledge of organised society, one is reassured that government as an organized body is a welcome development, contracted to end the obvious uninhibited and wanton oppression of humans by humans and the unrestricted immorality characterising the primitive Hobbesian “state of nature”. This is the premise upon which a government of the people by the people is most appreciated. Regrettably, these reasons for governance, and preferably democratic government, seem to have been compromised by the inability of political participants to delay instinctive gratifications. Such gratifications as personal greed for wealth and power have been captured by researchers like Eyo (2002).

Nwagboso and Duke,(2012, p. 232) in discussing the challenges of leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century state that:

“The current crop of leaders in Nigeria are only interested in their pockets. Hence, they seem to have redefined what constitute leadership”.

Similarly, Lawal and Owolabi, (2012, p.11) while pointing to leadership as the bane of Nigerian political development opined:

“Nigeria, since independence has produced a pattern of leadership characterised by coups, countercoups, corruption and instability”.

This coincides with earlier study by Adebayo and Ogunleye (2008, p. 6) which observed that:

“Long time exposure to military rule has conditioned Nigerian electorate to totalitarianism and maximum rule. Thus the idea of democracy and participatory democracy for that matter is somehow perceived as offensive and disgusting”.

This seems to be the implication of Achebe (1983) who foresighted leadership as a cog in the wheel of national development. It is against this backdrop that Ogbonna, Ogundiwin&Uzuegbu-Wilson (2012, p. 66) advised that:

“Given the fact that leadership has failed and has sustained a very complex chain of political dedevelopment (sic)that can only replicate itself if left unchallenged, the followers should step-up their game by actively involving in politics – be available in and for politics, curious, concerned, critical about the way they are governed. Knowing that the Nigerian government will never ‘put the issue to the people’, the people should grab the issue, it is theirs”.

In writing about followership, Kelley (1992) posits that followers are the people who act with intelligence, independence, courage, and a strong sense of ethics. The Merriam -Webster Online Dictionary (2016) defines followership as: "the capacity or willingness to follow a leader". The Civil Air Patrol (2013) defines followership as reaching a specific goal while exercising respect for authority, a positive attitude, integrity, and self -discipline. These definitions in capturing the essence of democratic government and citizenship, also points to the place of every citizen in political participation. This therefore, suggests that followership is not restricted to the masses; the political office holders are also followers since they have the

dimensions in which they are led by one or two other persons. For example a senator as the leader of a senatorial constituency may be an ordinary member in a senate committee; even the President of the country is a member of a political party and so on.

The very essence of followership necessitates obedience and compliance to rules of the organised authority and sometimes to the desires of the powerful authority figures. Thus, powerful political actors, as followers in the larger political setup are also politically reactive agents. In his agentic socio-cognitive view, Bandura (2001) observed that people are self-organising, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating, not just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by external events. People have the power to influence their own actions to produce certain results. The capacity to exercise control over one's thought processes, motivation, affect, and action operates through mechanisms of personal agency. Human agency has been conceptualised in at least three different ways—as either autonomous agency, mechanically reactive agency or emergent interactive agency. However, the notion that humans operate as entirely independent agents has few serious advocates, although it is sometimes invoked in caricatures of cognitive theories of human behavior (Skinner, 1971).

The present study seeks to explore the agency theory of political participation by examining the consistent pattern of perception and behavior of citizens as interactive agents in the political events in Nigeria. Thus, it tries to capture, the political psychology of the average Nigerian. Going back to the Nigerian political participation before and immediately after Independence, one may observe that there was an exacerbated political zeal; a display of political energy whose only attending demerit was ethnic nationalism (Ubaku, Emeh&Anyikwa, 2014), and not political alienation (Okafor, 2013). Though ethnic chauvinism was later de-emphasised by creation of more states, yet there seems to be a decline in sincere political energy after the Nigerian Civil war (1966-1970). Scholars (e.g. Ugwuja, 2015; Omale& Amana, 2014; Adebisi, 1998) point to bad leadership, military dictatorship, bribery and corruption in the electoral processes. Others (e.g. Eze, 1983) point to misplacement of priority by the politically uneducated and hungry followers, and others (e.g. Folarin, 2013) point to colonialism and neo-colonialism. Strikingly, Adebayo & Ogunleye (2008) point to authoritarian followership as a result of long exposure to military rule. However, no research has examined this socio-political

stagnation from the point of view of participants' political psychology that seem to be characterised by a sense of self-detachment to the woes of political engagements. Thus, rather than regarding these authoritarian followers (both the leaders and the led) as naïve citizens who are at the mercy of conditioned response acquired by association with military dictatorships, the present researcher opines that they are conscious political agents who, unfortunately, suppose they are not responsible for their undemocratic obedience to powerful authorities. This is the fundamental message of Milgram's (1963) experiment on obedience, and the premise on which the present study differs from other studies on personality and politics in Nigeria.

### **Agency theories**

An agency relationship is one in which one or more persons (the principal[s]) engage another person (the agent) to perform some service on their behalf which involves delegating some decision making authority to the agent (Meckling & Jensen, 2000). Perhaps the most recognisable form of agency relationship is that of employer and employee. Agency theory is the study of the agency relationship and the issues that arise from this, particularly the dilemma that the principal and agent, while nominally working toward the same goal, may not always share the same interests. The literature on agency theory largely focuses on methods and systems—and their consequences—that arise to try to align the interests of the principal and agent.

Ross (1973) outlined agency as a universal principle and not just a theory of the firm. Even so, he limited the scope of his paper to the problem of incentive, and laid out a model for inducing the agent to produce maximum gains for the principal. In contrast, Mitnick (1973) laid out a much more general theory of agency with possible application to numerous societal contexts. Mitnick identified the problems of agency as (1) the principal's problem, (2) the agent's problem, (3) policing mechanisms and incentives. The principal's problem is to motivate the agent to act in a manner that will achieve the principal's goals. Examples of motivational tools are financial incentives, prospect of sanctions, and supplying information to activate norms (such as loyalty or obedience) and preferences that coincide with the principal's goals.

The agent's problem is that he may be faced with decisions to act either in the principal's interest, his own interest, or some compromise between the two when they do not coincide. Policing mechanisms are mechanisms intended to limit the agent's discretion, such as surveillance or specifically directed tasks. Incentive systems are mechanisms that offer rewards to the agent for acting in accordance with the principal's wishes, such as bonuses and increased pay (positive incentives) or fear of reprisals (negative incentives). Milgram (1974), adapted the agency theory to explain the fallout of his 1963 experiment on obedience. His explanation formed the theoretical background upon which agency theory will be explored in the present work with particular reference to political participation in Nigeria.

While explaining agentic transactions, Bandura (2001) posits that people are producers as well as products of social systems. He distinguishes among three modes of agency: direct personal agency, collective agency exercised through socially coordinative and interdependent effort, and proxy agency that relies on others to act on one's behalf to secure desired outcomes.

### **Theory of Personal Agency**

A starting point for understanding the development of personal agency is the assumption that all organisms require resources for physical growth and development (Hawley, 1999; Little, Hawley & Henrich, 2002; Ricklefs, 1979). Resources are the appetite for biological needs. There exists, however, an evolutionarily inevitable duality in the pursuit of resources. To meet basic needs that are difficult or impossible to obtain individually, a person can participate in a social group where the presence of others facilitates acquisition of resources. This social group, however, can become a source of competition for the very resources that it facilitates. This duality creates competition for resources within the social group. Thus, as group members, individuals experience wins and losses. These interpersonal patterns of wins and losses lead to what ethologists describe as a dominance hierarchy. Hawley (1999) defines such hierarchies as the emergent ordering of individuals based on their relative competitive abilities. As Little et al. (2002) have argued, the history of both early and life-long win-loss experiences influence the development of personal agency, and these early experiences can be viewed as the seeds of agency.

One important feature in the development of an agentic self is that different behavioral strategies can be used in these evolutionarily predicated skirmishes. Hawley (1999) has outlined two classes of strategy that individuals may use. First, there are coercive strategies such as aggression, manipulation, deception, and so on. Second, there are prosocial strategies such as helping, appeasement, alliance formation, and so on. Individuals develop consistent patterns in the use of strategies to pursue their goals. These consistently used strategies and the ratio of wins to losses represent building blocks to the developing self-system (Bandura, 1997, 2001; Skinner, 2002).

In addition to the biological needs that drive behavior and precipitate the development of agency, at least three fundamental psychological needs are at play: Competence, Relatedness, and Autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Competence is the basic need to successfully engage, manipulate, and negotiate the environment (White, 1959). Relatedness reflects the necessity for close emotional bonds and feelings of connectedness to others in the social world (Sroufe, 1990). Autonomy reflects the degree to which one's actions are predicated on the self or, when non-autonomous, by causes external to the self (Deci & Ryan; Wehmeyer, 2001).

Little et al. (2002) have argued that goal pursuit in the service of these needs is yet another driving force in the development of personal agency. Here, the need for autonomy is perhaps the most critical. For actions to be self-agentic (i.e., to possess a strong sense of personal empowerment), they must be autonomous. In this regard, autonomy is the quality of owning one's actions and making action choices that are integrated with the self and that serve one's needs.

### **Agency Theory of Political Participation: A Sociological Perspective**

Traditional accounts of representative democracy regard political parties as the main agencies (collective agency) linking citizens' demands to the state (Lawson 1980; Lawson & Markl, 1988). Parties can serve multiple functions at mass level: simplifying electoral choices, educating citizens, and mobilising people to vote, as well as articulating and aggregating political interests, coordinating activists, recruiting political candidates and leaders, organising parliaments and allocating government offices (Ware, 1996). Political parties have long played a vital role in

organising and mobilising supporters, encouraging peripheral groups of citizens to turnout on polling day in “get out the vote” drives, generating volunteers for campaign work such as canvassing and leafleting, providing organisational skills for members and activists, and facilitating an important channel of recruitment into elected office (Seyd&Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley, Seyd& Richardson 1994).

However, Norris (2002) provides important insights into short-term changes in participation, such as changes in levels of electoral turnout affecting established democracies. Norris opines that the linkage mechanisms between political parties and the electorate are disappearing. Thus, if the linkage mechanisms have weakened, so that agencies (e.g. political parties) are no longer so capable of mobilising voters, then this could be expected to lead towards greater electoral disengagement (Norris, 2002). Dalton and Wattenberg (2001) present clear systematic evidence for the widespread erosion in partisan identification apparent across postindustrial societies in the post-world war era. Weakened long-standing loyalties connecting supporters and parties and the labour unions have been widely regarded as contributing towards a wearing down of electoral participation. Wattenberg’s (2000) comparison of nineteen member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states demonstrates a 10 percent average fall in turnout from the 1950s to the 1990s, a pattern that he attributes to weakening party membership and declining partisan loyalties among the general public in established democracies (Wattenberg. 2000). This has also affected other countries in Africa (Kamara, 2012) including Nigeria where greater obedience is accorded to powerful political actors rather than political parties, resulting in abrupt change of party and cross-carpeting whenever such powerful political actors exit to another political party (Aleyomi, 2013; Opadere&Agbana, 2015).

### **Agency Theory of Obedience: Theoretical Framework**

Milgram (1963) developed a series of classic experiments to investigate obedience under, what he considered to be, conditions that could be used to explain the atrocities committed during the Nazi control of Germany. Milgram set out to investigate whether “anyone” could be ordered to harm another. Milgram conducted his obedience experiments on “normal”, healthy participants to investigate whether they would yield to an authority figure and administer electric shocks to

an innocent confederate of the study. The result of his experiments led Milgram to conclude that we are all capable of complying to the demands of someone in authority, even if this means hurting another person (proxy agency). Using this conclusion as a basis for his agency theory, Milgram (1974) believed that we are all capable of extreme obedience, which must serve some evolutionary or societal function. Milgram observed that human society was hierarchical in nature, with many at the bottom of the hierarchy and a few at the top giving instructions on how they are to behave. He proposed that this hierarchy must have evolved for some survival function, whereby societies that adopted this hierarchy survived and those that did not died out. He also thought that this hierarchical social organisation must have some stabilising function – to create social order and harmony within the group. Obedience within this social organisation is a necessary feature to maintain it. Without obedience there would be challenges to this social order resulting in chaos and societal breakdown. Within the hierarchical structure of a social group, there must be a mechanism that ensures obedience.

On the basis of obedience, Milgram (1974) proposed that humans exist in two different states: autonomy and agency. In an autonomous state, a human acts according to his/her own free will. However, when given instruction by an authority figure humans switch to agentic state of mind, where they see themselves as acting as agents for the authority figure. Milgram observed that many participants in his obedience study experience moral strain when ordered to harm another person. Moral strain occurs when people are asked to do something they would not choose to do themselves, and they feel it is immoral or unjust. This moral strain results in an individual feeling very uncomfortable in the situation and, in extreme circumstances, they show anxiety and distress. This anxiety is felt as the individual contemplates dissent and considers behaving in a way that contradicts what he/she has been socialised to do. The shift into an agentic state of mind relieves moral strain as the individual displaces the responsibility of the situation onto the authority figure, thereby absolving his/herself of the consequence of his/her actions.

### **Leadership Crises in Nigeria: Antecedents and Consequences**

Personalised politics or politics by leadership is the distinguishing feature of African politics (Sklar, 2006). It refers to the centralisation of all political power in the executive, i.e. the institutionalisation of executive political leadership. In Nigeria, for example, the personalised nature of the political arena is evident in the domination by powerful “godfathers” at the apex

of vast patronage networks at federal, state and local levels. Political outcomes are the function of intense competition between these godfathers, often at the expense of the population (Sklar, 2006). It all goes to show that despite the various attempts at the practice of democracy by different states of Africa, the fundamental tenets of democracy has not taken root. Adopting democracy therefore has not being an easy task for the continent given her traditional native cultures which often tilts towards a patriarchal and hierarchical structure. It should be mentioned that many of the former British colonies in Africa had gone through what can be referred to as military rule immediately after the British left. From Ghana to Nigeria to Sierra Leone to Pakistan to Zimbabwe to Uganda, to the Fiji islands - the list is endless (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982). It is in assertion of this background that Yesufu (1982) observed that the intervention of the military in the political scene of Nigeria was not totally a surprise to most political observers and thinkers. In Nigeria, the military's first intervention in politics in January 1966, was celebrated by the people due to the perceived corruption among the public office holders.

Today, it seems the military leaders have left their footprints in social, economic and political spheres of Nigeria, although the perception of most Nigerians is that the Nigerian military does not have what it takes to manage the country (Ihonvbere, 1991). However, since the inception of current democracy in 1999, retired military officers have dominated the political stage of Nigerian, and the processes, dictating almost authoritatively, the direction of Nigerian political wheel. The reasons for the ex-military officers' access to plum political offices and top corporate boardroom positions are not far-fetched. One, some retired senior military officers were in control of power and economy for a very long time, some of them had corruptly enriched themselves by stealing public funds. Two, these retired officers possessed huge wealth that they can use at every opportunity to pave their ways into top federal and state political offices such as members of the senate, national and state house of assemblies, chairmanship of political parties and local government. Three, some of them had acquired civil education by going to business or management schools and universities in Nigeria and overseas, therefore, they were able to combine brain power with financial power which they acquired while in charge of the management of the country's economy for over thirty years (Welch, 1995). As leaders with institutional marks of authoritarianism it is not surprising that they would produce

authoritarian followers. This is the implication of Adebayo and Ogunleye (2008, pp. 6-7) who observed that:

“The command style of the military administration and avalanche of decrees and their ouster clauses, as obnoxious as they may be, have engendered and developed in the Nigerian civil society authoritarian personality”.

Authoritarian persons are conservative, slavish to rules and authority, prejudiced in thinking and discriminatory in behaviour (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson & Sanford 1950). It is a personality that is antithetic to the freedom and empowerment that liberal democracy guarantees for the citizenry. In the face of exacerbated political indecency, reduced adherence to party principles (Norris, 2002; Wattenberg, 2000) and seemingly conscienceless corruption perpetrated using the authoritarian followers, it may not be difficult to perceive that these authoritarian followers have become agentic.

### **Agentic Political Personality: Conceptualisation and Definition**

Politics refers to the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debates and struggles between parties about having power or the activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organization. Ideally, political office is a call to serve the people and this is why democracy as a “government of the people by the people and for the people” best captured the idea of politics. But, the realistic link between politics and the affairs of the state has helped to explain why negative or pejorative images have so often been attached to politics. Thus, in the popular mind today, politics is closely associated with the activities of politicians. In Nigeria, politicians are often seen as power-seeking hypocrites who conceal personal ambition behind the rhetoric of public service and ideological conviction (Ugwuja, 2015; Ani, 2012). Indeed, this perception has become more common in the modern period as intensified media exposure has more effectively brought to light examples of corruption and dishonesty, giving rise to the phenomenon of anti-politics. This rejection of the personnel and machinery of conventional political life is rooted in a view of politics as a self-serving, two-faced and unprincipled activity, clearly evident in the use of derogatory phrases such as “office politics” and “politicking”. Such an image of politics is sometimes traced back

to the writings of Machiavelli, (Machiavelli & Wootton, 1995) who developed a strictly realistic account of politics that drew attention to the use by political leaders of cunning, cruelty and manipulation.

Personality, on the other hand, refers to an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms – hidden or not – behind those patterns (Funder, 2004). Mayer, (2007) observes that personality refers to the organised, developing system within the individual that represents the collective action of that individual's major psychological subsystems. Thus, personality refers to those characteristics of the person that account for consistent patterns of feelings, thinking, and behaving (Pervin, Cervone & John, 2005). The political life of a country is predicated upon the dominant personality of the political participants (Adebayo & Ogunleye, 2008). Thus, the political breath of a nation is the breath of the nation's political actors. In Nigeria, the impunity with which electoral malpractices are plotted and the resultant postponement or declaration of elections as "inconclusive"; the apparent insensitivity of political representatives to the plights of their constituencies, and the exposed cases of financial corruption (Alamu, 2016) are clear indications that the political breath of the nation is undemocratic. Moreover, the prolonged military rule, the significant participation of retired military personnel in Nigerian politics, and the accompanying authoritarian leadership tendencies seem to reinforce a culture of servant-lord relationship. Thus, political followers, supporters and subordinates seem to be perceived as mere instruments for personal aggrandisement rather than partners in political progress.

The formidable powers of these political lords, who are also seen as demi gods in many quarters, seem to remove the responsibility of undemocratic political practices (e.g. thuggery) from the social cognition of these followers on the ground that they (the followers) are reacting to the political demands of the day - the demands only "politicians" should take responsibility for. For example, by commission (in response to the will of the god-fathers), the "political loyalists" rig elections, and by omission (in demonstration of apathy to the existing political culture), the "politically uninterested" citizens refuse to vote in general elections (Fagunwa, 2016; Okafor, 2013), yet blaming the emerging recalcitrant administrations on the recklessness of the "political leaders" (Ugwuja, 2015). With every political leader posing as a follower in different capacities in the face of seemingly unspoken delegation of power to perform a wrong function, it has become

impossible for anyone to accept responsibility for any political misdemeanour. Former President Ibrahim Babangida felt he owed no apologies to Nigerians over the annulment of June 12, 1993 election (Kolawole, 2016) seemingly because he acted as an agent of a more powerful authority – the military junta. This is the basis on which this researcher refers to the Nigerian political personality as an agentic personality. The researcher, therefore, defines agentic political personality as a political life style characterized by a sense of self-detachment to the consequences of the undemocratic political activities perpetrated in favour of more powerful political authorities. It has a consistently conformist outlook characterised by denial of behaviour as self-determined, and projection of outcomes unto others. In other words, it depicts socio-psychological disposition where a political actor feels that the negative results of his/her actions or inactions should be recorded as part of other people's history.

## **Conclusion**

This paper contends that the obvious political impasse experienced by Nigerians is predicated upon a faulty political orientation that seem to be characterized mainly by a naïve sense of self-detachment to the undemocratic activities performed, in favor of recalcitrant power brokers. This sense of self-detachment, to the political events of the country, is the foundation of agentic political life style. For a meaningful headway out of this political jungle, Nigerians must turn from building strong political individuals to building strong political institutions by observing the following:

1. **Integrity:** Those in positions of political authority must seek and observe integrity in the processes of governance. Integrity refers to the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles. It depicts truthfulness and trustworthiness. Political integrity ensures that party manifestos are executed to the letters. This breeds transparency and accountability in the political deals with the electorates.
2. **Value for individual differences:** Nigeria is a country with diverse culture, guaranteeing the existence of people with different political orientations and varied intellectual sophistications. However, the apparent unhealthy partisan and ethnic zealotry seem to discourage a government of national unity which has the unique

advantage of harnessing sound intellectual contributions to the looming political and economic crisis. In addition, the political office holders and leading political parties must imbibe the spirit of accommodation and cooperation. Thus, running inclusive government cannot be overemphasised.

3. **Sincere political education for citizens:** This is a move to understand the essence of government and democratic government for that matter. The bulk of the masses must sincerely seek meaningful political education; education aimed at understanding the roles and powers of citizens in a democratic setting. Where the people understood the meaning of democracy and the power repository in the electorate at all levels, they are more likely to remain positive as interactive (or partially autonomous) agents in the wave of negative political demands. With this, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for political participants to engage in undemocratic political life style.
4. **Committed participation in general elections:** Participation in general elections is a wonderful opportunity to overthrow a non-performing government. However, when participants are not properly educated on election matters, they may take so many things for granted (e.g. assuming that once votes are cast, those votes must count). Committed participation ensures that votes are cast, counted and announced as reflected. It goes further to ensure the speedy processes of election tribunals and the enthronement of justice. This is what sincere political education for citizens can guarantee in democratic system of government.
5. **Unmasked National conversation:** This entails transparent National discussion between the government and the people; a frequent National conversation that goes beyond mere media exposure or ordinary town hall meeting. It is a system of national integration that will present the government's intentions and actions before every citizen, for input, irrespective of location, media reach, education or socio-economic status.

This study has a limitation of not being a quantitative survey, and representative in terms of sample size. However, it has laid the foundation for further inquiries into such area as the effects of religion, culture, and economy on agentic personality development. This is one of the areas future research may complement the present study.

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