

ASSESSMENT OF SELECTED SOCIAL CAPITAL ATTRIBUTES AMONG AGE GRADE GROUPS IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The growth and development of most rural communities is also dependent on the activities of indigenous social groups. The efficiency of these groups is often hinged on their social capital status and their ability to interact and function collectively. The study therefore, assessed selected social capital attributes among age grades in Abia State, Nigeria with special considerations on their network and membership, trust, reciprocity, norms and values. Purposive and random sampling techniques were employed in the selection of 90 age grade members as respondents from 3 local government areas in the State that had functional age grades. Data were collected using questionnaire/interview schedule, analysed using percentages and mean and corroborated through Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Results revealed that 67.8% of the respondents indicated that membership of age grades was mostly compulsory for every adult male, 67.8% believed most members could assist them financially while 98.9% believed most members would assist in times of emergency. The result also showed that age grades had high frequency of interaction with other groups ($\bar{x}=2.14$), 94.4% of the respondents agreed there was high level of reciprocity in the group and 91.8% agreed they had high level of compliance with norms and values. The study concluded that the social capital attributes among age grades in the study area was high and this enabled them work collectively as teams to achieve theirs and communities' goals. It therefore recommends that community leaders and stakeholders should encourage the formation of age grades and boost social capital to assist in community development.

Keywords: Social capital, age grade, norms and value, reciprocity

INTRODUCTION

The need to work together to achieve set organisational goals and objectives cannot be overemphasised. Rural communities are continually teaming up to form social groups that can be used in enhancing the well-being of the people. Such social groups as the town union, welfare associations, clubs, neighbourhood associations, development and improvement unions, age grades among others are regularly formed and used for these purposes.

The age grade is a collection of people of about the same age with the difference ranging from between three to five years and sometimes between seven and ten years. The age grade system varies from one community to the other and is hardly uniform. In Igboland the age grade system goes by such names as *Otu-Ogbo*, *Ndi-Ebiri* or *Ndi-Uke* (Ujumadu, 2017). Several age grades are found in the communities and they go by different names such as *Enyimba*, *Agumba*, *Akajiaku*, *Otuobi*, *Asomba*, *Udoebiri*, *Ugochukwu*, *Obimba* to mention but a few. Age grades have served as very important tools in community development in capacities such as local security and community defenders, enforcers of law, cleaning and clearing village roads and squares, serving as farm hand/labour source to members. In recent times, age grades in some communities have been seen to provide rural infrastructure such as roads, schools, markets, bridges, pipe-borne water hospitals, public libraries and laboratories (Ijekpa, 2007; Ndukwe, 2015; Mben Age Grade, 2014). They also serve as

network through which members have received some benefits such as jobs, privileged information and assistance due to their social capital base.

Social capital is a necessary resource for every team work. It is a network of relationship between people, the influence, ties and social relationship (connections) that enhance collective action in communities. Yekinni and Oguntade (2012) defined it as the benefit people derive from their relationship with others, while Adogame (2013) affirms that it is the advantage created by a person's location in a structure of relationship. By this, the outcome of social capital is dependent on location and degree of involvement. Putnam (2000) referred to social capital as those characteristics of social groups that enhance the smooth functioning of a society by encouraging coordinated actions. It encourages individual and group actions that arise from networks of relationship, reciprocity, trust and social norms. Social capital is a resource that is acquired through involvement in social activities (Nygqvist, Victor, Forsman and Cattan, 2016). The benefit of social capital is not for the individuals alone but also for the communities. It makes people watch out for the interest of their members and promotes good neighbourliness, as well as helps in the circulation of useful information among group members.

Social capital is multi-dimensional and come in different combinations. It shapes the interaction amongst the members of a group, organisation, community, society or simply network and can be studied through various

perspectives. Possible constructs but by no means all are: networks and membership, reciprocity, norms, social cohesion, collective action, trust and solidarity, goodwill, commitment, information and communication (Tajuddin, 2011; Nyqvist *et al*, 2016; Grootaert *et al.*, 2004; Putnam, 2000).

Social capital has been reported to be of immense benefit to individuals, their social groups and the community at large (Nyqvist *et al*, 2016). It has helped in the smooth running of social groups, fostering collective action and enhancing team play. Social capital constructs addressed in this study include; network and membership, trust, reciprocity, norms and values Age grades as social groups which are saddled with enormous responsibilities of community development and welfare require social capital to achieve their goals. This study therefore, assessed selected social capital attributes of the age grades which help them function effectively and carry out collective actions as a team. The specific objectives were to:

- i. examine the membership and network of interaction of age grades in the study area;
- ii. ascertain the level of trust among age grade members;
- iii. determine their level of reciprocity and
- iv. ascertain their level of compliance with norms and values

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Abia State, Nigeria. Abia state is one of the five states that make up the South-east geo-political zone in Nigeria. Multistage sampling procedure was employed in the selection of sample for the study. First, three local government areas (LGA) in the state namely Ohafia, Bende and Umuahia with functional age grades systems were purposively selected. Secondly, three communities were randomly selected from each LGA and in the third stage one age grade was randomly chosen from each community, to give nine age grades. Finally, ten members were also randomly sampled from each age grade which gave a sample size of ninety persons.

Data for the study were collected using questionnaire/ interview schedule and corroborated through focus group discussions (FGD). FGDs were conducted in each LGA. Each of the selected age grades nominated three members comprising of 2 men and 1 woman for the discussion. There were 9 discussants in each group and the researcher moderated the sessions.

Membership and network of interaction were subjected to frequency counts and percentages. Frequency of age grades' interactions with other groups was measured using mean counts obtained from a three point Likert-type rating scale of always (2), sometimes (1) and never (0). Mean scores equal to or above 1.05 were considered as

high level of interaction while scores below 1.05 were low.

Level of trust among age grade members was measured by providing them with statements to which they answered strongly agree (SA=5), agree (A=4), undecided (UND=3), disagree (DA=2) and strongly disagree (SDA=1). Weighted mean scores were generated by multiplying the frequency of response with the assigned weight on the scale and used to categorize the responses. The mean score results were categorised thus: ≥ 4.0 = high level of reciprocity, 3.50 – 3.99 = moderate and 3.05 – 3.49 =low

To measure level of reciprocity, the respondents were asked to respond strongly agree (SA=5), agree (A=4), undecided (UND=3), disagree (DA=2) or strongly disagree (SDA=1) to the statements provided. The maximum obtainable mean score was 25 and the minimum 5. Benchmark mean was obtained by adding 5+4+3+2+1 to get 15 and dividing by 5 to get 3.0. The mean score results were categorised thus: ≥ 4.0 = high level of reciprocity, 3.50 – 3.99 = moderate and 3.05 – 3.49 =low

The level of compliance to norms and values was measured by asking the respondents to answer strongly agree (SA=5), agree (A=4), undecided (UND=3), disagree (DA=2) and strongly disagree (SDA=1) to statements provided to elicit response on level of compliance. Mean scores were generated by multiplying the frequency of response with the assigned weight on the scale and dividing by the sum by 5. The maximum obtainable mean score was 20 and the minimum 4. The mean score result was used to make decision and categorise the responses thus: ≥ 4.0 = high level of compliance to norms and value, 3.50 – 3.99 = moderate and 3.05 – 3.99 = low

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Membership and network of interaction of age grades in the study area

Table 1 shows distribution of age grades based on membership and network of interaction. This was examined under the following headings; mode of membership, size of membership, diversity of members' occupation, extent of connection and frequency of interaction with other groups.

Mode of membership - The result on Table 1 revealed that 67.8% of the respondents indicated that the mode of membership into age grades in Abia State Nigeria was mostly by birth while 21.1% were required to join the group. This finding corroborates Ndukwe (2015) that membership of age grades in many communities is could either be compulsory or voluntary depending on the goal of formation.

Memberships size - On the average per age grade, there were 151 registered members. This

implies that social capital is relational and can only occur in groups. Coming together in large numbers, and pooling resources to carry out collective action such as provision of rural infrastructure and security, lightens the burden on individuals. According to Mba (n.d.) there is a relationship between population and self-help projects. Similarly, a quote from Goodrich in Higuera (2013), states that “There is strength in numbers, yes, but even more so in collective goodwill. For those endeavours are supported by mighty forces unseen.”

Diversity of members’ occupation - The result on Table 1 shows that 47.8% of the respondents, had farming as their primary occupation. This is typical of rural residence where people depend on farming as a major source of livelihood. The presence of people from other fields, show that the age grade does not

discriminate based on type of occupation, but is a collection of people from all works of life who play diverse roles to make the group function as a team. This is in agreement with the report of Jannah (2017) that among the members of different age grades can be found people with different roles that enable the groups function as teams.

Levels of education - Majority (93.3%) of the respondents in Abia State had one form of formal education or the other. The implication is that most of the respondents were literate, had good knowledge of things going on around, and may have the desire to be associated with positive change. In line with this Onuekwusi, Odoemelam and Ube (2014) stated that increased level of education increases people’s involvement in social organisations.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on Membership and Network of interaction(n=90)

	Frequency	%
Mode of membership		
Born into group	61	67.8
Required to join	19	21.1
Voluntary choice	9	10.1
Others	1	1.1
Mean size of age grade	151	
Diversity of members’ Occupation		
Farming	43	47.8
Trading	18	20.0
Civil Service	23	25.6
Artisan	6	6.7
Different levels of Education		
No formal Education	6	6.7
Primary	35	38.9
Secondary	32	35.6
Tertiary	17	22.8
Perceived difference in economic status of most group members		
Mixed	23	25.6
Higher than you	7	7.8
Lower than you	18	20.0
Equal with you	42	46.6
Age grade members who can give financial assistance		
No one	5	5.6
One or two	8	8.9
Three or four	16	17.8
Five or more	61	67.8
Age grade members can help in Emergency		
No	1	1.1
Yes	89	98.9

Source: Field survey, 2017

Perceived economic status of age grade members - The result on perceived economic status of most members of the age grade in Table 1 revealed that a good number (46.6%) of the age grade members perceived that all their members were of equal economic status. By this, most age grade members in Abia state view their mates as

equals in everything not minding other social positions or posts of responsibilities occupied.

At one of the Focus Group Discussions, it was reported that each age grade tried to outdo what the other had done, and even initiate new ones in an atmosphere of healthy competition. This sense of equality drives a healthy competition

where people aspire to progress and achieve their goals just as their mates are doing so. This finding is in consonance with the report of Zaman (2019) that nothing motivates like competition because it drives you to push harder and also fuels you to consistently put in the work that will make you healthier and happier in the long term.

Age grade members who can give financial assistance and support in emergency - The result presented on Table 1 showed that majority (67.8%) of the respondents in the study area, indicated that five or more members of the age grade could assist them financially when necessary while 98.9% also believed that most of their mates would come to their aid in case of an emergency.

The implication of this is that the age grades like in most African settings, where safety nets are inadequate, provide reciprocal assistance to their members. They rally round and give assistance to the needy knowing that they may need the same assistance someday. In all the Focus

Group Discussions and interviews conducted, the participants reported that:

“...no active member of the age grade, who participates in the activities of the group, is left alone in times of need or emergency. We quickly mobilize to give assistance financially and otherwise whenever there is need.”

The finding is in line with Amzat and Razum (2014) who reported that many families rely on network of reciprocal assistance provided by members of a large group with people supporting each other.

Age grade’s interaction with other groups - This was measured on a three point scale of always (2), sometimes (1) and never (0) and the result on Table 1b revealed that age grades across the study area, had high frequency of interaction with other groups (\bar{x} =1.14) but they interacted more with groups within their communities (\bar{x} =1.33) than with groups outside their communities (\bar{x} =0.94).

Table 1b: Distribution of respondents based on frequency of their group’s interaction with other groups

Group interaction	Never (0)	Sometimes (1)	Always (2)	(\bar{x})
With groups within community	0	66.7	33.3	1.33
With groups outside the community	25.6	54.4	20.0	0.94
Grand mean				1.14

Decision: ≥ 1.05 = High, <1.05 = low

Source: Field survey, 2017

This result implies that age grades in the study area were homogenous and had more of bonding network than bridging or linking network. This is likely to make assessing information and resources from outside the community more difficult.

Bridging and linking networks often provide that which is missing locally and fosters collaboration. Claridge (2018) reported that bridging or linking network gives people access to the outside world and to heterogeneous people they are not close or related to. Bonding network on the other hand provide strong ties of relationship to people that are related or already know themselves thereby limiting the benefits available to them from outside. Baiyeguinihi (2013) further stated that

other advantages often associated with homogenous groups are that of greater trust, information sharing and ability to reach decision easily.

Level of trust

The result on level of trust presented in Table 2.0 revealed that majority (86.6%) of the age grade members agreed that they trusted each other and would confide in each other without fear of betrayal (\bar{x} =4.43). Most (73.3%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that they did not trust each other in matters of borrowing and lending (\bar{x} =2.20), while 40% agreed that there was need for one to be alert so that people do not take advantage of them

Table 2.0: Distribution of respondents based on level of trust (n = 90)

Trust	SA (5)	A (4)	UND (3)	D (2)	SDA (1)	\bar{x}
Members confide in each other with no fear of betrayal	72.2	14.4	2.2	6.7	4.4	4.43
Members have to be alert or someone would take advantage of them	14.4	25.6	17.8	34.4	7.8	3.04
Members generally do not trust each other in matters of lending and borrowing	10.0	6.7	10.0	40.0	33.3	2.20

SA= Strongly Agreed, A = Agreed, UND = Undecided, DA = Disagree, SDA = Strongly Disagree

Source: Field survey, 2017

This implies that trust among the age grade members, it is not absolute. However, on a general note the groups are able to function, and achieve results, because members trust each other and the system they are in. They are willing and able to help their members financially and otherwise. DeLong (2013) described these attributes of social capital as the grease that oil relationships and give mutual benefit. Gleenson (2015) stated that trust is a prerequisite for success in relationships and team work and the level of trust is directly proportional to productivity, performance and profitability.

Age grades' Level of Reciprocity - Presented on Table 3.0 is result on level of

reciprocity. The result showed that 95.5% of the respondents agreed that there is mutual support/dependency among age grade members, 97.7% agreed that the members are willing to help mates who are in need because they know same will be done for them if the need arises while 92.2% are of the opinion that what is good for the community is good for them. Majority (98.9%) are in support of community based projects and other local economic efforts that benefit the community while 96.7% cooperate to support the local economy. With a grand mean score of (\bar{x} =4.72), majority (94.4%) of the respondents agreed the level of reciprocity was high.

Table 3.0: Distribution of respondents based on level of reciprocity (n = 90)

Reciprocity	SA	A	UND	DA	SDA	\bar{x}
There is mutual support/ dependency among members of my age grade	83.3	12.2	1.1	3.3	0	4.76
I am always willing to help members of my age grade who are in need because I know they will do same for me if the need arises	81.1	16.6	1.1	1.1	0	4.78
Members of my age grade believe that what is good for the community is good for them	77.8	14.4	5.6	1.1	1.1	4.67
Members of my age grade support community based projects and other local economic efforts that benefit the community	73.3	25.6	0	1.1	0	4.71
Members of my age grade cooperate to support the local economy	75.6	21.1	1.1	0	2.2	4.68
Grand mean						4.72

SA= Strongly Agreed, A = Agreed, UND = Undecided, DA = Disagree, SDA = Strongly Disagree
Field survey, 2017

This implies that the members of the age grades come to each other's aid and that of the community, expecting that in their time of need, other members and the community will be available and willing to help out based on their performance. For instance, in those communities where age grade membership is compulsory, members of the deceased's family are made to pay all the outstanding debts before the dead can be buried. During the Focus Group Discussion in Ohafia and Bende LGAs, discussants revealed that *"...participation in age grade activities is a give-and-take situation. Any person who does not participate in age grades' activities is sanctioned and denied some rights in the community. However, those who participate in the groups' activities and contribute to community development are celebrated and honoured at their traditional retirement (when the age grades handover their major infrastructural projects to the community) by family, friends and the community...."*

Asomba (2009) succinctly captured it by stating that the age grades bore full responsibility for the burial of members and support members at burials of their parents or children. They are also the major guests at wedding ceremonies of male members and traditional marriages of members' daughters. The climax of their activity is the celebration by the community at retirement.

Compliance to norms and values - For every relationship and group activities, there are dos and don'ts that guide behaviour. Results in Table 4.0 revealed that 96.6% of the age grade members agreed that they valued the relationship with their mates, 93.3% believed in each other and the oneness of the group, also 98.9% agreed that erring members of the group were sanctioned appropriately and 91.2% were of the opinion that all members were treated equally without preference. With a grand mean score of (\bar{x} = 4.59), majority (91.8%) of the respondents had high level of compliance with their norms and values of the group

Table 4.0: Distribution of respondents based on compliance with norms and values (n=90)

Norms and values	SA	A	UND	DA	SDA	\bar{x}
Members of my age grade value our relationship	83.3	13.3	2.2	1.1	0	4.79
Offending members of my age grade are sanctioned appropriately without bias	58.9	34.4	2.2	4.4	0	4.48
Whatever the age grade does to one person, it does to others	67.8	31.1	1.1	0	0	4.67
Members of my age grade believe in each other and the oneness of the group	55.6	35.6	5.6	3.3	0	4.43
Grand mean						4.59

SA= Strongly Agreed, A = Agreed, UND = Undecided, DA = Disagree, SDA = Strongly Disagree

Source: Field survey, 2017

By implication, age grades are properly constituted groups with constitutions and bye-laws stating the acceptable behaviours and corresponding punishment for defaulters which made members value their relationship, knowing that offenders would not go unpunished. Corroborating this, Idigo (2014) stated that each age grade had defined obligation in community service, was jealous of its good name and so disciplined its erring members. Ekong (2010) stated that socialization and control made people behave in a manner that was predictable and conformed to established norms and values.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Age grades in Abia state have very high levels of network of interaction, trust, reciprocity and compliance to norms and values. Their social capital attributes are therefore rated high and as a result they are able to pull resources together and achieve great results collectively. They trust their mates and are willing to help them when necessary. They also bear each other's burdens and give assistance in times of need, making the members have a high sense of belonging. The resources contributed are used to assist members and the community, and the outcomes of their collective actions are beneficial to both the individuals and the communities. It is therefore recommended that community leaders and stakeholders should encourage mates and peer groups from very young ages to have healthy affiliations by organising games and competitions that can help them develop bonds and boost social capital to assist in community development. Town unions, community heads and age grade leaders should open up and reach out to other groups outside their community to increase linkage and bonding networks and benefit from the good in other lands.

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