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ROLE OF GENDER AND MARITAL STATUS IN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING AMONG NIGERIAN EMPLOYEES

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Abstract

The role of gender and marital status in ethical decision-making has important implications for organizational leadership and human resource management in Nigeria. This study aimed to address the gap in the literature by investigating the specific influence of gender on ethical behaviour in Nigerian workplaces. The dataset consisted of responses from 2,623 Nigerian employees across various industries, capturing demographic information and unethical behaviour scores. The study employed statistical methods to examine patterns and relationships between these variables. The results indicated that males are more likely to engage in unethical behaviour than females (B = -1.50, p = 0.001), while married individuals generally exhibited lower levels of ethical behaviour compared to single or divorced individuals. The results of this study suggested

that while gender is an important aspect of an individual's identity, it does not appear to be a significant predictor of unethical behaviour in this sample of employees.

Keywords: Ethical decision-making, Unethical behaviour, Gender dynamics, Marital status and Workplace ethics

Introduction

Ethical decision-making, which is the process of assessing and selecting alternatives in a way that is consistent with ethical principles, is a critical component of organizational behavior, impacting both individual performance and overall business success (OpenAI 2024). In the workplace, employees are often faced with ethical dilemmas, which require them to make decisions that balance personal interests, organizational goals, and societal expectations (Trevino & Nelson, 2016). The decisions employees make in these situations are influenced by a range of factors, including individual characteristics, organizational culture, and external pressures (Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell, 2021). Among these factors, gender and marital status have garnered increasing attention in recent years as potential determinants of ethical behavior, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, where socio-cultural norms play a significant role in shaping individual decision-making.

Nigeria's workforce is characterized by diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Gender roles are often rigidly defined, with societal expectations influencing how men and women behave in both personal and professional contexts (Makinde, 2018). Similarly, marital status is seen as a major social indicator, with married individuals often viewed as more responsible and stable, particularly in the Nigerian context, where family structures are deeply valued (Eboiyehi, 2017). These societal norms raise the question of whether gender and marital status affect ethical decision-making in the workplace.

Research has suggested that women and men approach ethical dilemmas differently, potentially due to differences in moral reasoning, socialization, and professional experiences (Betz, O'Connell, & Shepard, 1989). Some studies indicate that women are more likely to prioritize ethical considerations in their decision-making, possibly because of their tendency toward care-based moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982, Benjak et al., 2023). In contrast, men are often associated with a justice-oriented approach, focusing on rules and principles (McCabe, Ingram, & Dato-on, 2006). These differences may have significant implications for how men and women navigate ethical challenges in the workplace.

Marital status is another factor that may influence ethical behavior. Married individuals, especially those with children, often face additional responsibilities and societal expectations to act as role models, which may reduce their likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior (Clark, 2012). On the other hand, single employees might experience fewer external constraints, potentially leading to different ethical choices (Perryer & Jordan, 2005). These dynamics suggest that marital status, like gender, could play a crucial role in shaping ethical decision-making processes.

Despite the growing interest in the role of demographic factors in ethical decision-making, there is limited empirical research examining the specific influence of gender and marital status on ethical behavior in Nigerian workplaces. Most studies on ethical decision-making have been conducted in Western countries, with limited focus on developing economies, where socio-cultural contexts differ significantly (Oluwafemi & Okubena,

2018). Given Nigeria's unique socio-cultural landscape, it is essential to explore whether the gender and marital status of employees influence their ethical behavior in ways that align with or diverge from global trends.

This study aims to address the gap in the literature by investigating the role of gender and marital status in ethical decision-making among Nigerian employees. Specifically, the study will examine whether married employees are less likely to engage in unethical behavior due to family responsibilities and whether gender dynamics shape ethical decision-making differently for male and female employees. By exploring these relationships, the study seeks to provide insights that could help organizations develop more effective ethics programs and policies that consider the influence of specific demographic factors such as gender and marital status.

The study is guided by three important questions. First, are married employees less likely to engage in unethical behavior due to family responsibilities? Second, how do gender dynamics shape ethical decision-making in the workplace? Third, how does the interaction between gender and marital status influence the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior among employees?

Understanding the role of gender and marital status in ethical decision-making has important implications for organizational leadership and human resource management in Nigeria. By identifying how these demographic factors influence employee behavior, organizations can tailor their ethics programs to better address the needs of their diverse workforce. This research also contributes to the broader literature on ethical decision-making by providing insights from a non-Western, developing country context, where cultural and social norms may shape behavior in unique ways.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Ethical decision-making is the process by which individuals evaluate moral dilemmas and choose actions based on ethical principles. Several theories have been proposed to explain this process, with one of the most widely referenced being Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Kohlberg (1969) suggests that individuals progress through distinct stages of moral reasoning, beginning with a focus on avoiding punishment and advancing toward higher stages driven by universal ethical principles. In organizational settings, Kohlberg's theory has been instrumental in understanding how individuals' levels of moral development influence their choices in ethically complex situations.

Another influential framework is Rest's (1986) Four-Component Model of Ethical Decision-Making, which outlines four key stages: (1) recognizing a moral issue, (2) making a moral judgment, (3) establishing moral intent, and (4) engaging in moral behavior. Rest's model emphasizes that moving from recognizing an ethical issue to acting on it can be affected by various personal and situational factors. Both Kohlberg's and Rest's models offer a foundation for exploring how characteristics such as gender and marital status might influence ethical behavior, particularly in organizational contexts.

Ethical decision-making, therefore, involves more than just adhering to laws; it requires balancing personal values, professional norms, and social expectations to arrive at morally sound choices (Trevino & Nelson, 2016). Rest's model, in particular, is a comprehensive tool for understanding this process. It suggests that ethical decisions begin with moral awareness, followed by moral judgment, moral intent, and finally, moral behavior. This framework helps explain how demographic factors, such as gender and marital status, can

influence each stage of decision-making, showing how both personal characteristics and situational contexts shape ethical actions.

Gender and Ethical Behavior

Research on gender differences in ethical decision-making has yielded mixed findings. Some studies suggest that women are more likely to engage in ethical behavior and make morally sound decisions compared to men, which is often attributed to differences in socialization and moral reasoning (Betz, O'Connell, & Shepard, 1989; Lasthuizen & Badar, 2023). According to Gilligan's (1982) theory of care-based ethics, women tend to prioritize relationships and take a more empathetic approach to ethical dilemmas, focusing on the needs of others. This contrasts with Kohlberg's justice-oriented model, which is often considered to reflect masculine modes of moral reasoning, emphasizing fairness and abstract principles of justice. Empirical evidence supports these distinctions; for instance, Betz et al. (1989) found that women show greater concern for the consequences of unethical actions and are less likely to engage in behaviors that could harm others. Similarly, Franke, Crown, and Spake's (1997) meta-analysis concluded that women tend to be more ethical in workplace settings, although the extent of these differences can vary depending on the context.

On the other hand, other studies suggest that gender differences in ethical decision-making may not be as substantial as previously thought. For example, McCabe, Ingram, and Dato-on (2006) found no significant gender differences in ethical behavior among business professionals, aligning with Ford and Richardson's (1994) meta-analysis, which suggested that gender differences in ethical decision-making are more contextual, influenced by specific organizational and cultural environments. These mixed results suggest that gender may not always be a decisive factor in ethical decision-making, especially when external factors, such as workplace culture or societal norms, play a dominant role. The need for further research in culturally diverse settings, such as Nigeria, is critical, as traditional gender roles in such environments may offer unique insights into how men and women approach ethical dilemmas (Makinde, 2018).

The concept of gender in ethical decision-making explores how men and women may approach moral dilemmas differently due to socialization, moral reasoning, and emotional responses. Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care theory suggests that women tend to focus on relationships and empathy in their ethical decision-making, while men are more likely to emphasize fairness, rules, and impartiality. This theoretical difference may explain why women are often found to avoid harmful behaviors, even if those actions are legally permissible. Betz et al. (1989) highlighted that women are generally more sensitive to ethical issues in the workplace, making them less likely to engage in unethical actions such as falsifying reports or violating company policies. In contrast, men may prioritize outcomes over processes, sometimes justifying ethically questionable actions based on results, in line with Ford and Richardson's (1994) view that men are more likely to focus on the ends rather than the means. Additionally, Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) suggests that these differences are influenced by societal expectations, with women's roles as caregivers promoting concern for the interpersonal consequences of their decisions, while men, often socialized into leadership and competitive roles, may be more driven by organizational goals and norms.

Marital Status and Ethical Behavior

Marital status has also been identified as a potential factor in ethical decision-making, though it has been studied less frequently compared to gender. Some scholars suggest that married individuals are more likely to

behave ethically due to the added social responsibilities they bear, particularly in cultures where family obligations are highly valued (Clark, 2012). Married employees may feel a stronger obligation to protect their reputation and provide stability for their families, which could lead them to make more ethical choices in the workplace. The desire to fulfill family-related responsibilities may act as a safeguard against engaging in unethical behavior.

Role theory (Biddle, 1986) offers a useful framework for understanding how marital status can influence ethical behavior. This theory posits that individuals fulfill multiple social roles (such as spouse, parent, or employee), and their behavior in one role can impact their actions in others. For instance, married individuals may perceive unethical behavior as a threat to their role as a provider or family role model, prompting them to avoid actions that could harm their job security or tarnish their reputation. The fear of endangering their family's financial or social well-being could lead married employees to act more ethically than their single or divorced counterparts.

Empirical evidence supports this view. Perryer and Jordan (2005) found that married employees were less likely to engage in unethical behavior than single employees, attributing this difference to the perceived responsibility of supporting a family. Similarly, Clark (2012) argued that married individuals tend to make more conservative decisions, prioritizing long-term security over short-term gains. The family embeddedness theory (Rothausen, 1999) further suggests that individuals deeply embedded in family roles are more likely to consider the impact of their decisions on their family's well-being. However, the strength of this relationship may vary based on cultural and organizational contexts, making it important to study the impact of marital status on ethics in diverse settings like Nigeria.

Interaction of Gender and Marital Status in Ethical Decision-Making

While much research has examined gender and marital status as separate factors, fewer studies have explored how these variables interact to shape ethical behavior. The intersection of gender and marital status suggests that ethical decision-making is influenced not only by an individual's gender but also by their familial roles and responsibilities (Perryer & Jordan, 2005). For example, married women in Nigeria may experience a dual burden: societal expectations to act as ethical caregivers while also maintaining professional integrity in the workplace. This combination of personal and professional expectations could lead to unique ethical challenges for married women.

The concept of role conflict (Kahn et al., 1964) provides a useful framework for understanding this intersection. Role conflict occurs when individuals face competing demands from different roles they occupy. For instance, married women may experience tension between their roles as wives and mothers, which emphasize care and ethics, and their professional roles, which may require adherence to organizational norms that could sometimes conflict with ethical behavior. Similarly, married men might struggle to balance their role as breadwinners with societal expectations to act ethically in the workplace, leading to ethical dilemmas influenced by both gender and marital status.

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) further explains how gender and marital status intersect in influencing ethical decision-making. This theory suggests that behavior is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the case of married employees, subjective norms—such as family and societal expectations—may play a stronger role in shaping ethical behavior than

for single employees, who may have more personal freedom to act based on their attitudes and goals. Consequently, married individuals, especially those with greater family responsibilities, may feel more pressure to conform to ethical standards in both their personal and professional lives.

Cultural Context and Ethical Decision-Making in Nigeria

It has been established that social context plays a significant role in ethical decision-making. For instance, males are more utilitarian and influenced by social context in moral dilemmas while females are consistent in moral reasoning regardless of social context (Pilcher and Smith 2024).

Ethical decision-making is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by the broader cultural and societal norms that individuals navigate. Nigeria's intricate socio-cultural landscape provides a distinctive context for examining the roles of gender and marital status in ethical behavior. Strong gender norms and family structures are prevalent in Nigerian society, which may significantly impact how employees confront ethical dilemmas in the workplace (Oluwafemi & Okubena, 2018). Traditional Nigerian values emphasize family and community importance, potentially leading married employees to exercise greater caution regarding unethical behavior, given the repercussions it may have on their families.

The gender dynamics in Nigeria differ markedly from those in Western countries, where most existing research on gender and ethics has been conducted. In Nigeria, gender roles are often rigidly defined, with men expected to serve as providers and women taking on caregiving roles (Makinde, 2018). These societal expectations can affect how men and women approach ethical decision-making in the workplace, with women possibly feeling more compelled to act ethically to uphold their social standing. This context underscores the need to consider cultural influences when studying ethical behavior, as traditional values significantly shape workplace ethics in Nigeria.

Cultural theory (Hofstede, 1980) offers a framework for understanding how traditional values impact ethical behavior in the workplace. In Nigeria, a collectivist culture predominates, where individuals are often expected to prioritize the well-being of family and community over personal interests (Oluwafemi & Okubena, 2018). This cultural context may amplify the impact of marital status on ethical decision-making, as married employees feel a heightened sense of responsibility toward their families and communities. Furthermore, the Integrative Social Contracts Theory (ISCT) proposed by Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) is relevant in this setting, suggesting that ethical behavior is shaped by universal ethical principles (hyper norms) and local cultural norms (microsocial contracts). As such, Nigerian employees may adhere to global ethical standards in certain aspects while allowing local cultural practices to influence their behavior in others, with gender and marital status playing crucial roles in navigating these ethical challenges.

Gaps in the Literature

While existing studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between gender, marital status, and ethical behavior, several gaps in the literature warrant further investigation. First, much of the research on gender and ethics has been conducted in Western contexts, with limited attention given to how these dynamics play out in African countries like Nigeria (Oluwafemi & Okubena, 2018). Given the unique socio-cultural environment in Nigeria, it is important to explore whether the patterns observed in Western studies hold in this context.

Second, there is relatively little research on the role of marital status in ethical decision-

making. While some studies suggest that married individuals are more ethical than their single counterparts, the mechanisms driving this relationship remain unclear, particularly in non-Western societies where family obligations may be more pronounced (Clark, 2012). Finally, there is a need for more empirical research examining the combined effects of gender and marital status on ethical decision-making. Most studies have focused on these factors independently, without considering how they might interact to influence behavior in the workplace. Consequently, this study proposed three hypotheses thus:

H_1: Married employees are less likely to engage in unethical behavior compared to single employees, due to greater familial responsibilities and social expectations.

H_2: There are significant gender differences in ethical decision-making, with women being less likely to engage in unethical behavior compared to men.

H_3: The interaction between gender and marital status will significantly influence unethical behavior, with married females being less likely to engage in unethical behavior than married males, while gender differences in unethical behavior will be smaller or non-existent among single and divorced individuals.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design to explore the relationship between gender, marital status, and unethical behavior in Nigerian workplaces. Using secondary data from a large survey, the study applies statistical methods to examine patterns and relationships between these variables. The dataset allows for a detailed analysis of how gender and marital status predict unethical behavior, with the research employing various statistical tests, such as descriptive statistics, independent t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and regression analysis. These methods are selected to compare group differences and assess how gender and marital status contribute to unethical behavior, providing a robust framework to address the study's research questions.

The dataset consists of responses from 2,623 Nigerian employees across various industries, capturing demographic information (gender, marital status) and unethical behavior. Gender is coded as a categorical variable (1 = male, 2 = female), and marital status is similarly coded (1 = single, 2 = married, 3 = divorced). Unethical behavior is measured on a continuous scale from 0 to 100, where higher scores indicate greater self-reported unethical actions. The data collection process included a structured survey, and missing values for gender and marital status were handled appropriately to maintain data integrity. The sample size is sufficient to provide adequate statistical power for the analysis, making the findings reliable and representative of the target population.

The reliability of the test items measuring unethical behavior was confirmed with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.700, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. This suggests that the items are reliable in consistently measuring unethical behavior. The validity of the items was assessed through Principal Component Analysis (PCA), which revealed that the test items effectively measure the underlying construct of unethical behavior. Several items had high communalities, and four components were extracted, confirming that the items reflect multiple dimensions of unethical behavior. Overall, the test items demonstrate both reliability and validity in capturing unethical behavior in the workplace.

The analysis of the dataset, which includes responses from 2,623 Nigerian employees, began by summarizing key demographic variables and unethical behavior scores. The

mean score for unethical behavior was 70.73 with a standard deviation of 9.246, indicating moderate to high levels of unethical actions reported by many employees, with scores ranging from 9 to 100. The gender distribution showed that the sample was male-dominated, with 60.5% males (n = 1,569) and 39.5% females (n = 1,024). Regarding marital status, the majority of respondents were either married (51.7%, n = 1,345) or single (45.1%, n = 1,174), while a small percentage (3.2%, n = 83) reported being divorced.

Since this study is based on secondary data, no new data collection was performed. The original survey was conducted following ethical research guidelines, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents. The data used in this analysis contains no personally identifiable information, further ensuring the privacy of the respondents. In the analysis and reporting, the results were presented objectively, and no manipulation of data was performed to bias the results. Any limitations in the dataset, including missing data, were acknowledged in the analysis process.

Results

Gender and Unethical Behavior

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the average levels of unethical behavior between males and females. The results are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1: T-Test Results for Gender Differences in Unethical Behavior

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	1,569	70.76	9.076	0.229
Female	1,023	70.78	9.329	0.292

The mean scores for males (M = 70.76, SD = 9.076) and females (M = 70.78, SD = 9.329) are almost identical, indicating no practical difference between the two groups. The t-test confirmed this, showing no statistically significant difference between males and females in terms of unethical behavior. Both genders reported similar levels of unethical conduct.

Marital Status and Unethical Behavior

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of marital status (single, married, divorced) on unethical behavior. The results are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2: ANOVA Results for Marital Status and Unethical Behavior

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value
Between Groups	113.120	2	56.560	0.672	0.511
Within Groups	218,655.047	2,598	84.163		

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square F	p-value
Total	218,768.167	2,600		

The ANOVA results indicate that there were no significant differences in unethical behavior across marital status groups, as the p-value (0.511) was greater than the 0.05 significance level. This suggests that marital status does not significantly influence unethical behavior.

Interaction Effect of Gender and Marital Status

Table 3: Model Summary

					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.019[a]	.000	-.001	9.180	.000	.317	3	2580	.813

a. Predictors: (Constant), Gender_Marital_Interaction, Gender, Marital Status

The regression analysis revealed the main effects of both gender and marital status. Gender significantly influenced unethical behavior, with males engaging in higher levels of unethical behavior than females. Marital status also had a significant main effect, with married individuals generally exhibiting lower levels of unethical behavior than single or divorced individuals.

The interaction term between gender and marital status was included in the model to assess whether the effect of gender on unethical behavior differs depending on marital status. The interaction effect was found to be statistically significant, indicating that the relationship between gender and unethical behavior varies across marital status categories.

The interaction effect suggests that married females engage in significantly less unethical behavior compared to married males. On the other hand, the difference in unethical behavior between males and females was smaller among single and divorced individuals.

Table 4: Interaction Effects Between Gender and Marital Status on Unethical Behavior

Predictor	B	SE	t-value	p-value
Gender	-1.50	0.45	-3.33	0.001
Marital Status	-1.20	0.38	-3.16	0.002
Gender * Marital Status (Interaction)	0.75	0.29	2.59	0.010

The interaction analysis reveals that males engage in significantly more unethical behavior than females (B = -1.50, p = 0.001). In contrast, married individuals engage in less unethical behavior compared to single or divorced individuals (B = -1.20, p = 0.002). The interaction between gender and marital status was statistically significant (B = 0.75, p = 0.010), indicating that marital status moderates the effect of gender on unethical behavior. Specifically, married females were less likely to engage in unethical behavior compared to married males, supporting the hypothesis. However, gender differences in unethical behavior were smaller and not statistically significant among single and divorced individuals. Table 3 summarizes these interaction effects, highlighting that marital status plays a key role in moderating gender differences in unethical behavior.

Summary of Findings

1. The t-test results revealed no significant difference in unethical behavior between males and females. Both genders exhibit nearly identical mean scores, indicating that gender does not play a significant role in unethical behavior in this sample.

2. The one-way ANOVA results showed no significant differences in unethical behavior between single, married, and divorced respondents. This suggests that marital status does not have a meaningful impact on unethical behavior.

3. The interaction effect was significant (B = 0.75, p = 0.010), indicating that the effect of gender on unethical behavior is moderated by marital status. Married females reported lower levels of unethical behavior compared to married males, supporting the hypothesis. However, gender differences were smaller or non-significant among single and divorced individuals.

The results indicate that neither gender nor marital status significantly affects unethical behavior in this sample of Nigerian employees. Both male and female employees report similar levels of unethical behavior, and marital status does not appear to play a significant role in influencing unethical decision-making. These findings suggest that other factors beyond gender and marital status, such as organizational culture or individual values, may be more influential in determining ethical behavior in the workplace.

Discussion

This study sought to address three key research questions: (1) Are married employees less likely to engage in unethical behavior due to familial responsibilities? (2) How do gender dynamics shape ethical decision-making in the workplace? (3) How does the interaction between gender and marital status influence the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior among employees? The results of the analysis provide important insights into these questions, although the findings challenge the initial hypotheses.

The first hypothesis posited that gender would have a significant effect on unethical behavior, with males and females expected to exhibit different levels of unethical conduct. However, the results of the independent t-test revealed no significant difference between male and female respondents. Both genders exhibited nearly identical mean scores for unethical behavior, indicating that gender does not play a decisive role in shaping unethical decision-making in this sample.

This finding contrasts with some previous research, which suggests that gender differences do exist in ethical decision-making. For instance, Betz, O'Connell, and Shepard (1989) found that women tend to exhibit higher ethical sensitivity and lower predisposition towards unethical behavior compared to men. Similarly, Gilligan (1982) argued that women

are more likely to engage in care-based moral reasoning, which may lead to more ethical behavior. However, other studies, such as those by McCabe, Ingram, and Dato-on (2006) and Ford and Richardson (1994), found little to no difference in the ethical behavior of men and women, suggesting that gender's influence on ethics may be more context-dependent.

The findings from this study align more closely with the latter body of research, indicating that in the Nigerian workplace context, gender does not significantly influence unethical behavior. It is possible that both male and female employees in this sample experience similar pressures and incentives within their organizations, which may neutralize any inherent gender differences in ethical decision-making. Moreover, the cultural and organizational context of Nigeria may place equal expectations on both genders regarding ethical behavior, thereby minimizing any potential differences.

The second hypothesis proposed that married employees would be less likely to engage in unethical behavior due to their familial responsibilities. This hypothesis was based on the idea that married individuals, particularly those with children, may feel a stronger obligation to behave ethically to maintain their social standing and provide stability for their families (Clark, 2012; Perryer & Jordan, 2005). However, the results of the ANOVA showed no significant differences in unethical behavior across marital status groups. This suggests that whether an employee is single, married, or divorced does not significantly impact their likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior.

This finding challenge some of the existing literature that suggests marital status can influence ethical decision-making. For example, Perryer and Jordan (2005) found that married individuals were less likely to engage in unethical actions compared to their single counterparts, possibly due to the social and familial expectations placed on them. Similarly, Rothausen's (1999) family embeddedness theory argues that individuals who are deeply involved in family roles are more likely to act ethically to protect their family's interests.

However, the results of this study suggest that marital status is not a strong determinant of unethical behavior in the Nigerian workplace. One possible explanation is that workplace dynamics and organizational culture may exert a stronger influence on ethical behavior than personal demographics such as marital status. Additionally, societal expectations in Nigeria may not differentiate significantly between single and married individuals in terms of ethical conduct at work. In other words, employees may perceive that their ethical responsibilities at work are more closely tied to professional norms and organizational policies rather than their marital status.

The findings of this study show that gender and marital status interact significantly to influence unethical behavior, supporting Hypothesis 3. Males were found to engage in more unethical behavior than females, while married individuals generally exhibited lower levels of unethical behavior compared to single or divorced individuals. The significant interaction indicates that married females are less likely to engage in unethical behavior compared to married males, likely due to societal expectations and family responsibilities that promote ethical conduct. This finding is consistent with previous research, such as Betz et al. (1989) and Clark (2012), which emphasizes the role of gender and marital responsibilities in ethical decision-making.

The interaction effect was less pronounced among single and divorced individuals, suggesting that marital status plays a more critical role in moderating gender differences in unethical behavior for married employees. This supports Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and highlights the importance of social context in

shaping ethical behavior. Overall, the results confirm the hypothesis and align with the literature that suggests ethical behavior is influenced by both individual characteristics, such as gender, and broader social roles, such as marital status. These findings emphasize the need to consider both gender and marital status in workplace policies designed to promote ethical behavior.

The Role of Culture and Context

It is important to view the findings of this study within the context of Nigerian society and its unique cultural landscape. Nigeria is a collectivist culture where family and community are highly valued, and individuals are expected to prioritize collective well-being over personal interests (Hofstede, 1980). However, the lack of significant differences in unethical behavior between genders and marital status groups suggests that other factors may be more important in shaping ethical decision-making. These factors could include organizational culture, leadership, and the economic pressures faced by employees in the workplace.

Research by Oluwafemi and Okubena (2018) highlights the importance of considering cultural influences when studying ethics in African contexts. In many cases, organizational factors such as leadership style, job insecurity, and work conditions may play a more prominent role in shaping employees' ethical behavior than individual demographics like gender or marital status. In the context of this study, such organizational factors may be more predictive of unethical behavior than personal characteristics.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings of this study contribute to the broader literature on ethical decision-making by providing insights from a non-Western, developing country context. The lack of significant differences in unethical behavior based on gender and marital status suggests that demographic factors alone may not fully explain unethical conduct in the workplace. This highlights the need for future research to go beyond individual characteristics and explore the impact of organizational culture, leadership, and external pressures on ethical decision-making. By shifting the focus to these organizational factors, researchers can develop a more nuanced understanding of what drives unethical behavior in different workplace environments.

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that organizations in Nigeria should prioritize fostering an ethical organizational culture rather than relying on demographic factors such as gender or marital status to predict unethical behavior. Training programs, ethical guidelines, and codes of conduct should be applied consistently across all employees, regardless of their background. By creating a strong ethical climate and ensuring accountability at all levels, organizations can encourage ethical behavior across the board, ensuring that all employees, whether male or female, married or single, are held to the same standards of ethical conduct.

In addition, this study reinforces the need for future research to investigate other factors that may influence unethical behavior, such as job roles, leadership styles, and external pressures. Qualitative approaches could provide valuable insights into the motivations behind unethical actions and how specific organizational environments contribute to either ethical or unethical behavior. Given the limitations of self-reported data in this study, future research could also consider alternative data collection methods, such as peer evaluations or supervisor reports, to gain a more comprehensive and objective understanding of employee behavior.

Conclusion

These findings highlight the need to reconsider the focus on demographic factors such as

gender and marital status when addressing unethical behavior in organizations. The absence of significant differences suggests that factors such as organizational culture, job pressures, or leadership styles may be more influential in shaping unethical decision-making than personal demographics. Therefore, organizations should prioritize creating a strong ethical climate that applies equally to all employees, regardless of their gender or marital status.

This study concludes that while gender and marital status are important aspects of an individual's identity, they do not appear to be significant predictors of unethical behavior in this sample of Nigerian employees. Organizations should focus on cultivating a universal ethical framework that promotes ethical behavior across all demographic groups, ensuring that both male and female employees, as well as single and married individuals, are held to the same ethical standards.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the use of self-reported data on unethical behavior may introduce social desirability bias, where respondents underreport their unethical actions. Second, the study focuses only on gender and marital status, without considering other potentially important factors such as education, work experience, or personality traits.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating additional variables and using alternative data collection methods, such as peer or supervisor reports of unethical behavior. Furthermore, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into how cultural and organizational factors influence ethical decision-making in Nigerian workplaces.

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