



Sound Etiquette: A Panacea for the Sustainability of Counselling Profession in Nigeria

OBOCHI, Nduamake E. & NICHOLAS, Ikechukwu Jude

Department of Psychology and Counselling, College of Education, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike, Abia State Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The future of counselling profession in Nigeria largely depends on strict adherence to the code of ethics guiding the practice. Human challenges are becoming more complex by day, and those saddled with the responsibility of proffering solution to these challenges must be abreast with the code of conduct so as to carry out their duties within the established sphere of operation. This study examined sound etiquette as a panacea for the sustainability of counselling profession in Nigeria. Formation of ethical standards in counselling in Nigeria, rationale for the establishment of ethics in counselling, moral and social qualities of the counsellor and ethical principles was highlighted. Confidentiality which is the hub of ethics in every profession was properly addressed. Attention was also given to sexual feelings and behaviours in the therapeutic relationship, deployment of spirituality and religion into psychotherapy and bias judgment. The study outlined stringent measures to be followed for ethics violations in counselling practice. Based on the findings, the study suggested among other things immediate constitution of disciplinary committees to address ethical violators.

Keywords: Etiquette, Panacea, sustainability, Counselling, Profession.

INTRODUCTION

The future of counselling profession in Nigeria largely depends on strict adherence to the code of ethics guiding the practice. Human challenges are becoming more complex by day, and those saddled with the responsibility of proffering solution to these challenges must be abreast with the code of conduct so as to carry out their duties within the established sphere of operation. Professional associations that have stood the test of time in their practice such as Nigeria Medical Association NMA, Nigeria Bar Association NBA, Nigeria Society of Engineering NSE, Christian Association of Nigeria CAN, Nigeria Union of Teachers NUT, Nigerian Institute of Surveyors NIS, Association of Private Practicing Surveyors of Nigeria APPS, Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria PSN, Nigeria Union of Journalists NUJ, Architectural Council of Nigeria ARCON and Academic Staff Union of Universities ASUU is traceable to conscientiously following the set of code of conduct prescribed and unanimously adopted by her members. These professions have stayed for centuries compared to counselling profession that is just about 50 years, barely five decades of recognition and operation in Nigeria. It is pertinent to mention that each of the above mentioned professions has a prescribed course and examinations that must be followed before one will be considered qualified to be a member of such professional associations.

The principles or standards which guide the practice of professions differ in scope and specifications from profession to profession. Each profession follows its etiquettes as it applies to them. Counselling as a noble profession is a do without in that every human being has need for counselling in one way or the other. Therefore, for the profession to gain wider acceptance and be listed among other high class professions in the world, the practitioners must as a matter of commitment be guided by the laydown rules and regulations of the profession. Members of CASSON are required to be accountable in accordance with the ethical framework for the counselling profession and understand the basis of their ethical accountability and expressions and communicate same to all who desire to join this noble and

envious profession. Crespi (2013) observed that the need for school counsellors has been expanding and deepening over the past decades as the student population is becoming more diverse. The transforming role of school counsellors along with the transforming needs of students presents ethical dilemmas for school counselors. Counsellors working within the context of schools must be supported to develop skills and problem-solving strategies to navigate such professional dilemmas, predicaments and other unforeseen challenges that may arise from time to time.

Ethics is generally referred to as a system of moral philosophy or science of morality which seeks to establish guidelines by which human character and actions may be judged as good or bad, right or wrong (Nwamuo, 2007). Ethical standards as observed by Onomuodeke (2003) are rules and regulations both written and unwritten which guide practitioners of a profession. Professional ethics are principles that define the ethical behaviour of members of professional groups which counselling is one. It is a set of codes that govern the conduct of members of such profession. It is also a body of rules and regulations of a professional association. An ethical consideration in counselling is built on three premises – ethical decision making, research publications and sound judgment. Ethical decision making is the practical process through which counsellors base their actions, behaviour and choices. It draws on values, principles and standards of behaviour that inform professional practice. Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs CACREP stated that ethical decision making involves gathering facts, determining whether a problem or dilemma truly exists, and whether or not there is an ethical, legal, moral or professional issue involved. It uses a framework of client rights and professional obligations to make decisions. Duffy (2010) opined that ethical decision making is the process of considering divergent courses of action and their implications and consequences for the client, as well as for the counsellor and making choices in the light of conflicting values, principles and morals to enhance the counselling practices and processes in this 21st century.

On the other hand, sound judgment implies the right application for conducting, interpreting and reporting psychological tests results. Psychological test or testing which is a set of standard items or stimuli to which a client responds to must be interpreted without bias or prejudice. This means that the counsellor should be competent in the use of and administration of psychological testing. Collaborating this view, Nwamuo (2007) advocates that actions that could impair professional judgment and increase the risk of harm should be avoided. Ekwe (2007) stated that counsellors should engage in a procedure that will enable them gather information and answer questions about clients' behaviour, personality traits or cognitive abilities. This whole process should not be manipulated, misrepresented, or handled outside the code guiding test development, construction, analysis and presentation of results. This is because the result of the test can be misleading and hamper generalization. In the same line, ethics as touching research and publication has to do with the protection of the participants in a given research. This is another area of concern in ethical consideration in counselling. Counsellors are responsible for protecting the welfare of their research subjects during and after research and avoid causing injurious, psychological, physical or social effects to persons who participated in the research activities (Barnett, 2014). In research, participation is voluntary and research subjects should not be coerced. They should be informed on the purpose of the research and be made to be aware of any experimental procedure, possible risks, disclosures and limitations of confidentiality (Abel, & Brown, 2014). Those who contributed significantly to the research should be given due credit through joint authorship, acknowledgment and footnote statements. Others whose materials were consulted should be cited in the reference list. The research work also should be original – not a copied work. It is in the light of the foregoing that the researchers considered it necessary and holistically reviewed relevant available literatures on the subject matter and painstakingly presented the findings under the following sub-headings:

- Formation of ethical standards in counselling in Nigeria
- Rationale for the establishment of ethics in counselling profession.
- Moral and social qualities of the counsellor.
- Sexual feelings and behaviours in the therapeutic relationship.
- Spirituality and religion in ethical consideration in counselling.
- Ethical principles/confidentiality in counselling.

- Measures to checkmate ethical violations.

Formation of ethical standards in counselling in Nigeria

Counselling Association of Nigeria CASSON which was founded in 1976 is the body regulating the practice of counselling in Nigeria. At inception, the body adopted the ethical standards of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) since the activities of the both associations are similar. The ethical standards as adopted from APGA to guide CASSON have been identified by Okoye, et al (1990:256) to include:

- The members' primary obligation is to respect the integrity of the individual and promote the welfare of the counsellee or client he intends to give assistance.
- The counselling relationship and information must be kept confidential, consistent with the obligation of the members of a professional body.
- Records of counselling relationships are to be considered professional information for use in counselling, teaching and research. The identity of the client must be protected so that harm will not come to him.
- Counsellees must be informed of the conditions under which they may receive counselling assistance at or before the time when the counselling relationships is entered into. The purpose, goals, techniques, rules of procedure and limitations should be known to the counsellee at the beginning of the counselling session.
- The members reserve the right to consult with any other professional competent person to get better and necessary information that will help a counsellee.
- Where a member is unable to be of professional assistance to a counsellee, he is obligated to refer him to appropriate specialist.
- When a member learn from counselling relationships of the condition that is likely to harm others, the members should report the condition to the responsible authority but should be done in such a manner so as to conceal the identity of the counsellee.
- The member may not serve as a counsellor to a counsellee if he has other relationships with him, particularly of administrative, supervisory or evaluative nature. The counsellee should be referred to other specialist unless the situation is inevitable.

Rationale for the establishment of ethics in counselling profession

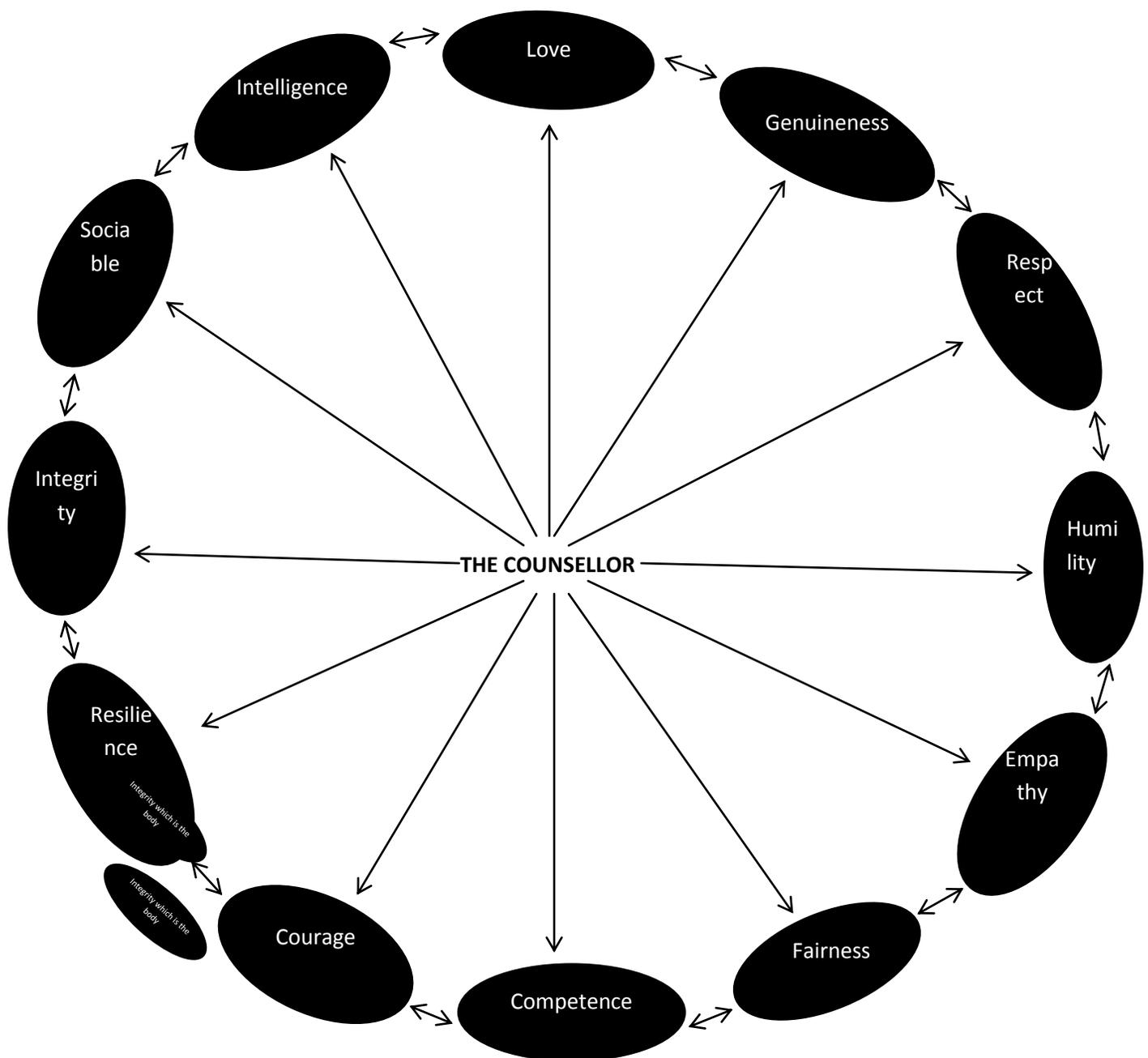
There are several reasons why counsellors, psychotherapists and psychiatrist should give due attention to ethical codes. The researchers thoughtfully recognized the following and propagated same so as to be committed to ensuring that the name and future of counselling and psychotherapy in Nigeria are preserved and protected:

- ✓ The susceptibility of clients: Most times clients or patients are weak and vulnerable, unable to resolve their emotional, psychological, and personal-social problems and make realistic decisions. Some others are persons with poor positive mental health, poor career decisions and the problem of agoraphobia. Ethical codes help and guide counsellors, therapists and psychiatrists from taking undue advantage of these vulnerable persons, violate their fundamental human rights and put the profession in jeopardy.
- ✓ Professional deformation: Practicing counselling without ethical codes make the profession capricious and disposed to abused. These set of codes enable practitioners operate within the confines of the scope of operation. The need to know what to do, specific skills and techniques to be used on specific problems, persons and situations will help to ensure the longevity of the profession and respect from the society.
- ✓ Checkmating excessiveness: The use of specialized skills must be controlled to avoid excessive usage and manipulations that will infringe on the client's welfare (Nwamuo, 2007). Thus, ethical codes guarantee quality delivery and control.
- ✓ Usurp of power: The counsellor is in position of power relative to his client. There is need for guideline to moderate his actions. The power can be used for exploitation if not properly guided by ethical codes.

- ✓ Public trust: Code of ethics is intended to maintain public trust in counselling profession. With code of ethics, the society is assured that information given in the course of counselling will not be divulged to the public.
- ✓ Protection of integrity: Ethics offer counsellors some grounds for safeguarding their privacy and integrity. With this in mind, the practitioner knows he is accountable.
- ✓ Protection from the public: Code of ethics also helps to protect the counsellor from possible attack, manipulation and exploitation by a vengeful or disturbed client. This is because the counsellor will not engage in an activity that will attract the provocation of the public.
- ✓ Standardization in practice: Code of ethics help to protect infiltration by non-professional counsellors. Thus, the principles, techniques and skills that is been used in a particular area is the same principles, techniques etc that is used every other area where counselling is been practice. The method of development, administration, scoring, interpreting and reporting psychological tests must be the same everywhere.

Moral and social qualities of the counsellor

Moral and social qualities of a counsellor refer to the character of the counsellor which makes him acceptable before the public he serves. His moral and social qualities must revolve around some building blocks like a circle. This is presented in a diagram.



Sexual feelings and behaviour in the therapeutic relationship

Sexual feelings and behaviour in therapeutic relationships refers to undue affection directed to female client in the case of male counsellor or undue affection directed to male client in the case of female counsellor. The situation here calls for serious ethical consideration. It is a taboo to see a counsellor turning counselling relationships into other forms of relationship that arouse sexual feelings. Sometimes clients can also begin to develop affection towards the counsellor especially female clients. The empathetic nature of the profession makes it possible for female clients to begin to see the male counsellor as one who cares and thus develop other thoughts and feelings. In which case, referral is highly recommended to avert the impending crisis.

Spirituality and religion in ethical consideration in counselling

Integrating religion and spirituality into practice, Barnett and Johnson (2011) assert that there are times when religious or spiritual concerns may be relevant to the reasons why clients seek treatment from a psychotherapist and counsellor, such as when religion is an area of conflict or distress or when religion is a source of strength and support. Psychotherapists and counsellors can access these religious or spiritual concerns to enhance the benefit of psychotherapy. To effectively integrate religious and spiritual interventions into ongoing psychotherapy and counselling, ethical considerations must be assessed; informed consent must be given, there must be competence on the part of the psychotherapist and counsellor, and there must be a clear expression of boundaries. Bratt (2014) analyzed four legal cases filed by clients against counsellors and counselling students who refused to counsel lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual clients on the basis of their own religious beliefs. The ethical dilemma in such cases is basically a clash between the personal values of the professionals vis-a-vis the rights of clients and whether or not harm will result to the client if the professional's religious or spiritual views are brought to bear upon the therapeutic relationship.

Ethical principles in counselling

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychology (BACP, 2002) presented six ethical principles which should be followed by counsellors. Same can be applied in Nigeria since we have not come up with one. It includes:

- ✓ **Fidelity:** Fidelity pertains to honouring the trust placed in the practitioner.
- ✓ **Autonomy:** Autonomy relates to respect for the client's right to be self-governing.
- ✓ **Beneficence:** This means a commitment to promoting the client's well-being based on professional assessment.
- ✓ **Non-maleficence:** Non-maleficence is founded on the commitment of avoiding harm to client.
- ✓ **Justice:** The principle of justice means the fair and impartial treatment of all clients.
- ✓ **Self-respect:** Counsellors need to foster their self-knowledge and to care for themselves.

Confidentiality in counselling

There are many ethical and legal issues surrounding the boundaries of confidentiality in counselling. Every human being has his private, public and secret lives. Since counselling deals with materials from client's secret lives, their trust that their confidences will be kept is absolutely vital. However, there may be reasons connected to agency policies and laws why counsellors cannot guarantee confidentiality. Such cases include a client's disclosure of suicide inclination, his plan to revenge which may result to loss of life, when dealing with minors (under-aged) etc. In either of the cases, counsellors should report to the appropriate agencies in order to avert the imminent danger. Counsellors should endeavour to communicate pertinent limitations on confidentiality to clients in advance (Ekechukwu, 2014). Furthermore, counsellors should seek client's permission for any communication to third parties.

Measure to checkmate ethical violation

Every organization, associations and government ministries have disciplinary committee set up to ensure that members of the organization who violate the rules of engagement are adequately sanctioned. Regrettably, CASSON seem not to have a disciplinary committee and has no plan of doing so in the nearest future. This situation will give room to dissolution of CASSON as members who break ethical codes will not be brought to book. Practical example is the case of Lagos conference where election was disrupted because of some disgruntled members of the association. It is sad to note that no disciplinary

action has been taking and the culprits are still occupying their exalted position in the association. The situation has also created division in the national body of CASSON. The researchers therefore identified the following as measures to checkmate ethical violation among counselling practitioners in Nigeria:

- Strict warning: Those who violate the rules of engagement for the first time should be given a query. They will be made to respond within a specified period.
- Suspension: In the case where a member has been previously warned and he continues with the obnoxious behaviour to the detriment of the future of the association, suspension should be implemented. A specified period of time should be given to the violators within which he or she is not expected to attend any conference or the meeting of the association both at national and state chapters until the sanction is lifted.
- Certificate revocation: Stringent measure can be applied where the first two measures fail to produce result. By this it means the offender does not have any legal backing to practice counselling in Nigeria until the issue is resolved appropriately.
- Dismissal: This is the climax of disciplinary action. The offence here must be a strong one. By this the offender ceases to be recognized as a counsellor in and outside Nigeria. Permission should be obtained from relevant authorities before taking this measure.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, the researchers strongly suggest the following for immediate implementation by the executive of CASSON both at national and state chapter levels:

- CASSON executives should vigorously pursue the certification and licensure of the profession. The national assembly should be lobbied to enact laws backing the practice of counselling in Nigeria. This will help the profession to be more recognized and her ethical standards strong as other professions.
- Disciplinary committee should be urgently constituted at the national level that will be saddled with the responsibility of bringing every ethical violation to book. There should also be disciplinary committees at the chapter levels but must report to the national.
- Conferences and workshops where ethical issues can be discussed should be frequently organized and attendance should be made compulsory for members of CASSON.
- Ethical standards and codes should be taught in the universities where counselling is offered as a course. This will help to disseminate the information early enough.

CONCLUSION

Ethical issue in counselling is a broad subject. The researchers have labored to touch relevant aspects in ethical consideration and make suggestions that can serve as a blueprint in discussing ethical matters in counselling in Nigeria. Furthermore, CASSON should ensure that counselling profession in Nigeria assumes her full professional status by lobbying the national assembly to enact law to back the practice.

REFERENCES

- Abel, A. and Brown, C. (2014) Ethical issues associated with training in university counseling centers. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology* 8 (4): 269–276.
- BACP, (2002). British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychology.
- Barnett, J. E. (2014). Sexual feelings and behaviors in the psychotherapy relationship: An ethics perspective. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 70 (2): 170–181.
- Barnett, J. E. and Johnson, W. (2011) Integrating spirituality and religion into psychotherapy: Persistent dilemmas, ethical issues, and a proposed decision-making process. *Ethics & Behavior* 21 (2) 147–164.
- Bratt, W. (2014). Ethical considerations of social networking for counsellors. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy* 44 (4) 335–345.
- Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (2009). CACREP Available at <http://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2009-Standards-pdf>

(Accessed 8 September, 2015).

- Crespi, T.D. (2013). Group counselling in the schools: Legal, ethical, and treatment issues in school practice. *Journal of Psychology and school* 46 (3) 273–280.
- Duffy, M. and Passmore, J. (2010) Ethics in coaching: An ethical decision making framework for coaching psychologists. *International Coaching Psychology Review* 5 (2): 140–151.
- Ekechukwu, R.O. (2014). Principles and techniques of guidance and counselling: A fundamental approach. Owerri: Career Publishers.
- Ekwe, A.O. (2007). Ethical issues in psychological assessment. In Nwamuo, P.A. and Ajoku, M.U. (eds.) Ethical and legal concerns in counselling Psychology. Owerri: Joe Mankpa Publishers.
- Nwamou, P.A. (2007). Review of professional ethics in counselling. In Nwamuo, P.A. and Ajoku, M.U. (eds.) Ethical and legal concerns in counselling Psychology. Owerri: Joe Mankpa Publishers.
- Okoye, N.; Adejumo, O.; Achebe, C. and Obanya, P. (1990). Fundamentals of guidance counselling. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nig Ltd.
- Onomuodeke, M.A. (2003). Principles and techniques of guidance and counselling. Benin: Bop Publishers.