



The Need for Ethical Code of Conduct among School Guidance Counsellors in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study was aimed at determining the need for ethical code of conduct among school guidance counsellors in Obio/ Akpor L.G.A., Rivers State. The study is a descriptive survey with a population of 159 A purposive sample of 159 respondents was used. This number comprises both male and female. The sample size is considered adequate since it is a fact finding survey study in which subjects are required to state the facts on ground. The instrument for the study is 'Ethical Code of Conduct for Counsellors Questionnaire' (ECCCQ) developed by the researchers. The instrument has 2 sections A and B with a total question items of 44 of 'YES' or 'NO' and high reliability coefficient of 0.83. The instrument was designed to answer 4 research questions and 4 null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance respectively. Data was analyzed with mean scores and chi square analysis was used for hypotheses. It was found that: (1) that there is a significant difference between the rights and dignity of the clients and the practice of school guidance counsellor which rejected the null hypothesis. (2) There is a significant difference between the level of competence of the school counsellor and the clients. The null hypothesis was rejected which means that school guidance counsellors need a high level of competence to effectively practice the profession.(3) There is a significant difference between the level of commitment or responsibility and the school guidance counsellor. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected which showed that school guidance counsellors must be highly committed to the clients. (4) There is a significant difference between the level of integrity and the school guidance counselor. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, meaning that school counsellors must maintain high level of integrity to be effective. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were made to various shades, such as, Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON), Association of Professional Counsellors of Nigeria (APROCON), Counsellor-Educators and Trainee Counsellors to keep to ethical codes of conducts to ensure effective counselling.

Keywords: Code, Counsellors, Ethical Conduct, Ethics, Practicing Counselor, Counselling.

INTRODUCTION

Guidance counsellors work with counselees (clients), as individuals and in groups, to whom they supply professional services concerning educational, vocational and personal/social development. Guidance counsellors respect the dignity, integrity and welfare of their counselees, work in ways which promote clients' control over their own lives, and respect client' ability to make decisions and engage in the personal change in the light of counselees' own beliefs and values. To protect clients' interests, counsellors are required to comply with code of ethics, which makes explicit the values underlying their practice.

The work of the guidance counsellor involves a special relationship to trust. That trust is promoted by setting and monitoring appropriate boundaries in the relationship, and making this action to the client and other relevant people. While the relationship with the counsellee is the primary concern, it does not exist in a social vacuum. For this reason, guidance counsellors have sensible regard for the social context of their work, which includes the wider community, the law and professional colleagues.

In Nigeria, the practice of counselling is very challenging. Counselling profession is seen by many as problematic and full of difficulties, if not endangered in Nigeria. Counselling, arguably, has the reputation among the professions of having the highest number of unwelcomed intruders and quacks. The counsellors' first-line competitors are not his or her fellow counsellors but quacks masquerading as counselling professionals. While counsellors are endeavoring to fight on their professional from the grip of intruders, they are also faced with a more important obligation of ensuring that their practice conforms to international best practices. The global best practice of counselling is anchored on tripod of norms-ethics, morals and law. This study attempts to highlighting and contextualizing these concepts with a view to elucidating on the concepts. It espouses the place of each of these norms in the day-to-day practice of counselling while examining the nexus between these norms and how they affect the counselling practitioner.

Statement of the Problem

Since the ultimate goal of counselling is to help an individual attain total wellness and become fulfilled. Ethical guidelines and procedures need to be in place to provide the necessary road map for practitioners. This will enhance high quality services that do not compromise set standards and provisions.

In recent times, there have been concerns about decline in quality, values, and public morality in our society. There have also been a lot of unethical issues of great concern among counsellors. These concerns among others are lack of confidentiality and privacy, lack of competency and responsibility and lack of integrity. Toward preventing the possibility of a counsellor galling into what has been termed "the grandiose professional self", ethical principles rather expect and enjoin counsellors to be more practical and realistic in practice and action. Toward the realization of a counselling practice that shows the counsellor to be more humane, ethical principles have been suggested as the bedrock of counselling and decision-making. It is against this background that this study is designed to examine the need for ethical code of conduct guiding practicing counsellors in Rivers State.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the need for ethical code of conduct guiding school guidance counsellors in Rivers State.

1. To ascertain the fundamental rights and dignity of the client within and without the counselling session.
2. To ascertain the level of competence in the counselling.
3. To determine the level of commitment of counsellors by being responsible to the client.
4. To determine the level of integrity of counsellors in counseling practice.

Research Questions

The questions answered in this study are as follows:

1. What are the fundamental rights and dignity of the clients?
2. What is the level of competence in the counselling profession before practicing?
3. At what level should a counsellor to committed or responsible to the clients?
4. What is the level of integrity in the counselling profession?

Hypothesis

- Ho₁: There is no significant difference between the fundamental rights and dignity of the client and the counsellor.
- Ho₂: There is no significant difference between the level of competence and the school guidance counsellor.
- Ho₃: There is no significant difference between the level of commitment or responsible to the clients and school guidance counsellor.
- Ho₄: There is no significant difference between the level of integrity and a school guidance counsellor.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study is descriptive design because it enables the researcher to collect data for the purpose of testing hypothesis and answering questions on current issues in the study. It involves description, recording, analysis, interpretation of the results and the subsequent prediction of possible of the study.

All the resident guidance counsellors in 14 public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor and all trainee counsellors and counsellor-educators in the two universities – University of Port Harcourt, and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. The stratified random sampling technique was used to select 9 counsellors resident in the 14 public schools and 35 trainee counsellors and 40 counsellor-educators from the two universities respectively. Trainee counsellors are 35 drawn from each university, making a total of 70 while counsellor-educators are 40 drawn from each University making a total of 80, thereby bringing the total sample size for the study to 159 subjects.

The main instrument for the study is “Ethical Code of Conduct for Counsellors Questionnaire” (ECCCQ) developed by the teachers. The instrument has two sections namely A and B. Section A contains demographic data which subdivided in 4 with 14 items. Section B contains question items of 30 making a total of 44 items. The instrument is to elicit information for the study. It is a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ instrument because it is a survey and fact finding study. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the researchers subjected the instrument to the scrutiny of two experts of Measurement and Evaluation before administration who made useful comments and suggestions that helped the researchers to fine tune the items. The instrument was then administered on 3 resident counselors, 5 trainee counsellors and 2 counsellor-educators of one university that was not included in the study. Halve of the scores yielded 0.83 split half reliability co-efficient. Data were analyzed using t-test statistical tool at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data and results of the research questions and their corresponding hypotheses are hereby presented in a tabular form

Research question 1: *What are the fundamental rights and dignity of the clients?*

In answering the research questions, mean score analysis was used. The results obtained were summarized and presented in table below:

Table 1. Summary of the mean score analysis of the fundamental rights of the clients

S/N	Item	YES	NO	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Do clients have any right to privacy?	100	59	159	1.63	Accepted
2	Does a client have any right to be treated with dignity?	145	14	159	1.91	Accepted
3	Does a client deserve any respect from a counsellor?	140	19	159	1.88	Accepted
4	Does a client deserve any right to be honored?	135	24	159	1.85	Accepted
5	Does the client deserve any right to be heard by the counsellor even when he is wrong?	130	29	159	1.82	Accepted
6	Does a client have any right to actively participate in the counseling session	150	9	159	1.94	Accepted
7	Does the counsellor has the right to disregard client’s moral and cultural values?	50	109	159	1.63	Accepted
8	Does the counsellor has the full right to reject the client based on the gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, race, ethnicity, age, national origin, party politics, social stance or class.	25	134	159	1.16	Rejected
9	Does the client have the right to be treated in dignified manner?	130	29	159	1.82	Accepted
10	Do clients have the right for confidentiality?	142	17	159	1.89	Accepted
11	Do clients have the right for counsellor to preserve his confidentiality	128	31	159	1.81	Accepted
Grand mean					1.75	Accepted

Results in table 1 above shows that out of the eleven items, ten items were accepted while only one item (item 8) was rejected as the fundamental rights and dignity of the clients. The areas that were mostly accepted as the fundamental rights and dignity of the clients were items 2 to 6 and 9-11. The item rejected by the respondents as the fundamental rights and dignity of the clients was the right of the counsellor to reject the client based on the gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, race, ethnicity, age, national origin, party politics, social stance or class. However, the grand mean which is 1.75 indicated that many of the items were fundamental rights and dignity of the clients and were significantly accepted.

Research question 2: *What is the level of competence in counselling profession by the school guidance counsellor?*

In answering the research questions, mean score analysis was used. The results obtained were summarized and presented in table below:

Table 2. Summary of the mean score analysis of the level of competence of the counsellor

S/N	Item	YES	NO	Total	Mean	Decision
1	A counsellor have limits to his job	70	89	159	1.44	Rejected
2	A counsellor should exceed his/her boundaries as occasion demand	90	69	159	1.57	Accepted
3	Counseling is a jack of all trade and master of none	30	129	159	1.19	Rejected
4	A counsellor should seek professional advice from other senior colleagues	150	9	159	1.94	Accepted
5	When the aims of a counselling session have been met /not met, should he/she persist with intervention?	120	39	159	1.75	Accepted
6	Should a counsellor make recommendations based on psychometric tests?	130	29	159	1.82	Accepted
7	For competency, should a counsellor engage in self-care?	70	89	159	1.53	Accepted
8	Should a counsellor seek support /supervision from colleagues when feeling stressed?	140	19	159	1.88	accepted
Grand mean					1.64	Accepted

Results in table 2 above shows that out of the eight items, six items were accepted while only two items (items 1 and 3) were rejected by the respondents as the levels of competence in counselling profession required by school guidance counsellor. The items that were mostly accepted as the levels of competence in counselling profession required by school guidance counselor were items 2 and 4 to 8. The items rejected by the respondents as the levels of competence in counselling profession required by school guidance counsellor were that a counsellor have limits to his job and that Counseling is not a jack of all trade and master of none .However, the grand mean which is 1.64 implies that many of the items indicated levels of competence in counselling profession required by school guidance counsellor and were significantly accepted.

Research question 3: *At what level should a counsellor be committed or responsible to the clients?*

In answering the research questions, mean score analysis was used. The results obtained were summarized and presented in table below:

Table 3. Summary of the mean score analysis of the level of commitment or responsibility of counsellors.

S/N	Item	Yes	No	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Should counsellors behave in the way that will damage the client's interests or undermine public confidence in the profession?	3	156	159	1.02	Rejected
2	If the counsellor is hired, should he speak out if the policies and practices of the organization are undermining the principles of his ethical conduct and practices?	110	46	159	1.67	Accepted
3	Is a counsellor permitted to support colleagues on request?	142	14	159	1.87	Accepted
4	Should a counsellor continue his/her counseling session when it is clear that the activity is more harmful than beneficial?	12	144	159	1.06	Rejected
5	Is a counsellor permitted to investigate all ethical issues in order to resolve all ethical dilemmas?	130	29	159	1.82	Accepted
6	Should a counsellor consult colleagues if faced with a difficulty or conflict between the law and an ethical principle?	135	24	159	1.85	Accepted
7	In an emergency situation, where there is no time to consult does he /she lean on his/her discretion?	125	34	159	1.79	Accepted
Grand mean					1.58	Accepted

Results in table 3 above shows that out of the seven items, five items were accepted while only two items (items 1 and 4) were rejected by the respondents as the levels of commitment or responsibility of counsellors. The areas that were mostly accepted as the levels of commitment or responsibility of counsellors were items 3, 5, and 6. The items rejected by the respondents as the levels of ethical responsibility of counsellors were that counsellors should behave in the way that will damage the client's interests or undermine public confidence in the profession and that a counsellor should continue his/her counselling session when it is clear that the activity is more harmful than beneficial. However, the grand mean which is 1.58 implies that many of the items indicated levels of commitment or responsibility of counsellors and were significantly accepted.

Research question 4: *What is the level of integrity in the counseling profession?*

In answering the research questions, mean score analysis was used. In answering the research questions, mean score analysis was used. The results obtained were summarized and presented in table 4 below:

Table 4. Summary of the mean score analysis of the level of integrity in the counselling profession.

S/N	Item	Yes	No	Total	Mean	Decision
1	After certification, should a counsellor still represent /defend the school, education, training and institute to which he belongs?	130	29	159	1.82	Accepted
2	Is a counsellor entitled to collecting fees or gifts where such acceptance would undermine impartiality and damage the profession?	2	157	159	1.01	Rejected
3	Is it an offence for a counsellor to use a written work with credit to the author?	99	60	159	1.62	Accepted
4	Where there is organizational conflict on ethical matters between the organization and the client, should a counsellor explain in such a way to client that organization over rules but the counsellor should still protect the interest of the client?	129	30	159	1.82	Accepted
5	Is a counsellor permitted to investigate all ethical issues in order to resolve all ethical dilemmas?	145	14	159	1.91	Accepted
6	Should a counsellor consult colleagues if faced with a difficulty or conflict between the law and an ethical principle?	127	32	159	1.80	Accepted
7	In an emergency situation, where there is no time to consult does he/she lean on his/her discretion?	54	105	159	1.34	Rejected
Grand mean					1.62	Accepted

Results in table 4 above shows that out of the seven items, five items were accepted while only two items (items 2 and 7) were rejected by the respondents as the levels of integrity in the counselling profession. The areas that were mostly accepted as the levels of integrity of counsellors were items 1,4,5 and 6. The items rejected by the respondents as the levels of integrity in the counselling profession were that a counsellor is entitled to collecting fees or gifts where such acceptance would undermine impartiality and damage the profession and that in an emergency situation, where there is no time to consult he/she should lean on his/her discretion. However, the grand mean which is 1.62 implies that many of the items indicated levels of integrity of counsellors and were significantly accepted.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the fundamental rights and dignity of the client and the counsellor.

To test for the above null hypothesis, a Chi-square statistics was used.

Table 5. Summary of a Chi-square test showing the difference between the fundamental rights and dignity of the client and the school guidance counsellor.

Chi-Square Test table				
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Decision
Pearson Chi-square	15.238	24	.021	Null hypothesis rejected
Likelihood Ratio	17.360			
Linear-by- linear Association	.305	24	.833	
N of valid Cases	159	1	.581	

Symmetric Measures			
		Value	Approx. sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.873	.021
		.636	.021
Cramer's V			
		159	
N of Valid Cases			

From the above table, it is observed from the chi-square test table (results in the Pearson chi-square row) that the p-value (Asymp. Sig.) is equal to 0.021 (which is less than the accepted level of probability of 0.05). This tells us that there is a statistically significant difference between the fundamental rights and dignity of clients and the school guidance counsellor. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. Again, looking at the symmetric measures table, the values of the phi and Cramer's V (both of which are tests of the strength of association between the two variables) are 0.873 and 0.636 respectively, which both indicate a strong positive relationship between the two variables. This therefore means that there is a very strong positive association between the fundamental rights and dignity of the client and that of the school guidance counsellor, a relationship that is found to be statistically significant, this means that the school guidance counsellor owes the clients the duty to respect his/her rights and dignity.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between the level of competence and the school guidance counsellor.

To test for the above null hypothesis, a Chi-square statistics was used.

Table 6. Summary of a Chi-square test showing the difference between the level of competence and the school guidance counsellor.

Chi-Square Test table				
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Decision
Pearson Chi-square	16.423	37	.006	Null hypothesis rejected
Likelihood Ratio	19.260			
Linear-by- linear Association	.307	37	.833	
N of valid Cases	159	1	.534	

Symmetric Measures			
		Value	Approx. sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.933	.006
		.728	.006
Cramer's V			
		159	
N of Valid Cases			

From the table above, it is observed from the chi-square test table that the p-value is equal to 0.006. This tells us that there is a statistically significant difference between the level of competence and the practice of a counsellor. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. Again, looking at the symmetric measures table, the values of the phi and Cramer's V are 0.933 and 0.728 respectively, which both indicate a strong positive relationship between the two variables. This therefore means that there is a very strong positive association between the level of competence and the practice of the counsellor, a relationship that is found to be statistically significant. There is therefore strong evidence that there is a great relationship between the level of competence and the ability of the school counsellor. This means that the school guidance counsellor needs so much level of competence to effectively practice his/her profession.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference between the level of commitment or responsibility to the clients and the school guidance counsellor.

To test for the above null hypothesis, a Chi-square statistics was used.

Table 7. Summary of Chi-square test showing the difference between the level of commitment or responsibility and the school Guidance counsellor.

Chi-Square Test table				
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Decision
Pearson Chi-square	14.127	28	.011	Null hypothesis rejected
Likelihood Ratio	18.623			
Linear-by- linear Association	.367	28	.621	
N of valid Cases	159	1	.713	

Symmetric Measures			
		Value	Approx. sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.843	.011
		.612	.011
Cramer's V			
		159	
N of Valid Cases			

From the table above, it is observed from the chi-square test table that the p-value is equal to 0.011. This tells us that there is a statistically significant difference between the level of commitment or responsibility to the client and the school counsellor. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. Moreover, looking at the symmetric measures table, the values of the phi and Cramer's V are 0.843 and 0.612 respectively, which both indicate a strong positive difference between the two variables. This therefore means that there is a very strong positive association between the level of commitment or responsibility of the counsellor and the practice of a counsellor, a relationship that is found to be statistically significant.

There is strong evidence that there is a great relationship between the level of commitment or responsibility of the counsellor and the efficacy of the practicing counsellor. This means that the school guidance counsellor needs so much level commitment and a great sense of responsibility to be effective in his/her practice.

Hypothesis 4: There is no significant difference between the level of integrity and a school guidance counsellor.

To test for the above null hypothesis, a Chi-square statistics was used.

Table 8. Summary of a Chi-square test showing the difference between the level of integrity and the school guidance counsellor

Chi-Square Test table				
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Decision
Pearson Chi-square	12.558	45	.029	Null hypothesis rejected
Likelihood Ratio	14.261			
Linear-by- linear Association	.362	45	.714	
N of valid Cases	159	1	.623	

Measures	Symmetric		
		Value	Approx. sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.998	.029
	Cramer's V	.754	.029
N of Valid Cases		159	

From the above table, it is observed from the chi-square test table that the P-value is equal to 0.029. This tells us that there is a statistically significant difference between the level of integrity and the school guidance counsellor. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. Furthermore, looking at the symmetric measures table, the value of the phi and Cramer's V are 0.998 and 0.754 respectively, which both indicate a strong positive association between the two variables. This therefore means that there is a strong positive association between the level of integrity of the school counselor and the practice of a counselor, a relationship that is found to be statistically significant. There is therefore strong evidence that there is a great relationship between the level of integrity of the counselor and the efficacy of the school guidance counselor. This means that the guidance counselor needs so much integrity level to be effective in his/her counselling practice.

Summary of findings

The findings of this study are summarized as follows:

- 1 There is a significant fundamental difference between the rights and dignity of the client and the practice of counselling.
- 2 There is a significant difference between the level of competence and the practice of counselling.
- 3 There is a significant difference between the level of commitment or responsibility and the school guidance counsellor.
- 4 There is a significant difference between the level of integrity and the school guidance counsellor.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

To answer the research question one, mean score analysis was used while the null hypothesis was tested using the Chi- square analysis. The result obtained indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between the fundamental rights and dignity of the client and the effective practice of a counsellor. This result reveals that for a guidance counsellor to be effective in his/her practice, he/she must pay attention to the fundamental rights and dignity of his/ her clients. This principle lies in the work of Shertzer & Stone (1980) that maintained that guidance counsellors should honour and promote the

fundamental rights, moral and cultural values, dignity, worth of clients. The counsellor should respect clients' right to privacy, confidentiality, self-determination and autonomy, consistent with the law. As far as possible, he or she should ensure that the counsellee understands and consents to whatever professional action they propose. The result obtained in the research question two indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. This result reveals that the more competent a counsellor is, the more effective he/she will be in the practice. This result is in tandem with the works of Oramah (2015), that says that the capacity to do no harm or to avoid inflicting injuries on clients raises the question of school counselor's competence. Emphasizing its necessity, Heppner, Wampold and Kivlighan (2008, p. 118) note that 'if our values is to help others, particularly those in need who come to rely on our services, then we have an obligation to help others as competently as possible.' Incompetence, therefore, in any form within the counselling is an express invitation of harming clients with wrong diagnosis, assessment and application of treatment modalities in the different cases. This is true because competence will rather enable the counsellor to avoid utilizing interventions that could potentially harm clients. Expectedly, counsellors who are ethically principled in decision and action would not employ diagnostic or treatment procedures that go beyond the scope of their training or accept clients whose personal functioning is seriously impaired and as such may require a more advanced treatment elsewhere (Corey, 1999). This explains why making appropriate referrals is inextricably tied to the principles ethic of 'do no harm.' Additionally, the competency level of a counsellor is maintained when they are committed to continuing professional training and growth after their formal education (Kottler & Shepard, 2011).

The mean score analysis was used to answer research question three while the null hypothesis was tested using the paired sample chi-square analysis. The result obtained indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. This result reveals that the more committed and responsible a counsellor is the more effective he/she will be in the profession.

This result is in agreement with the works of Oramah (2015) that opined that counselling requires firm commitment from the counsellors for its advancement. Therefore, the commitments to fairness while dealing with clients become the sine- qua- non for effective counselling delivery. The actions of the counsellor must be fair to all shades of counsellees that utilize counselling services. In other words, the counsellor who is driven by the principles of ethic of justice will be fair to clients irrespective of age, gender, religion, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, and cultural background. Indeed, justice in the context of counselling demands equality, which has got implications for non-discrimination and equitable treatment of all clients (Remley & Hertihy, 2005). This is true because all clients must have equal access to counselling services which removes the notion of partiality from the actions of the counsellor. Consequently, the counsellor must be free of all biases and prejudices that could interfere with the capacity for objectivity and neutrality (Kottler & Shepard, 2011). The result obtained in the research question four indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. This result reveals that the more competent a counsellor is, the more effective he/she will be in the practice. This ethical principle requires exhibiting or maintaining personal and / or professional loyalty faithfulness at all times. This disposition must be seen in counsellor at all times. It demands honouring commitment which the counsellor had entered into with the clients. Obligations must not be left unfulfilled. Clients must not have any cause or reasons to mistrust or doubt the integrity of the counsellor in any way. This is because trust is a vital condition for clients to open up themselves for the counsellor (Oramah, 2012b). The counsellor must be faithful to keep to the integrity of divulging privileged communications else that will jeopardize his reputation and the profession.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers concluded as follows:

1. There was significant difference in the null hypothesis of no significant difference between the fundamental rights and dignity of the clients and school guidance counsellors.
2. There was significant difference in the competence and capacity of the school guidance counsellor.

3. There was significant difference in the level of commitment or responsibility and the efficacy of the school guidance counsellor.
4. There was significant difference in the level of integrity and the school guidance counsellor.

RECOMMENDATION

Counseling Association of Nigeria (CASSON), Association of Professional Counsellors of Nigeria (APROCON), Counsellor – Educators and Trainee Counsellors to keep to ethical codes of conducts to ensure effective counseling.

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