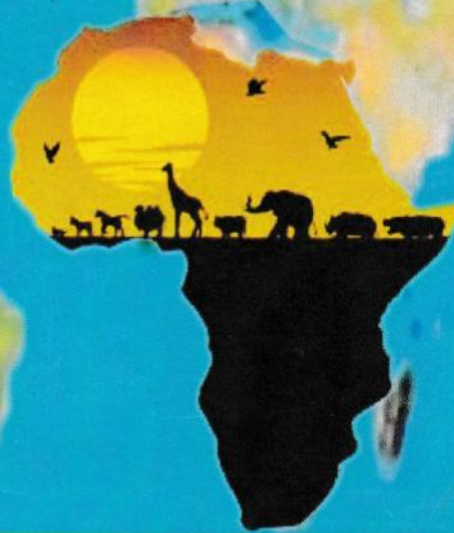




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Professional Competence in Guidance and Counselling Practice: Issues and Practices

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Abstract

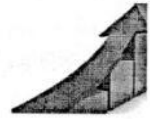
Competence is a part of the personal moral qualities expected of counselors. This paper examined the issue of professional competence as one of the ethical issues in guidance and counselling practice in Nigeria. In doing so, it provided insights into the purposes and the needs for ethical monitoring and elements of professionalism. The paper also highlights the issues of competencies and responsibility. Other topics such as counselling profession and the role of professional associations and personal characteristics of effective counsellors; were also discussed. It was concluded that counselors protect the integrity of, dignity and welfare of the client regardless of who the client is. It was recommended that newly-graduated counsellors, even seasoned counselors must consult other professionals because consultation is now the cornerstone of good, ethical counselling practice; and that counsellors should adhere to a strict code of ethics even if their company or industry does not have a written code, they should display ethical behaviour at all times.

Keywords: Professional, Competence, Ethical Issues, Professionalism, Professional Association

Introduction

Counselling as an intimate form of learning demands a practitioner who is willing to shed stereotyped roles and be a real person in a relationship. Counselling is a process by which clients are invited to look honestly at their behaviour and lifestyle and make certain decisions about how they want to modify the quality of their life. Counsellors can learn about themselves if they really think about their experiences in helping other persons. The first thing is that these others are persons, individual human beings, more than cases, clients, or patients. Lessening counsellor's stress is a by-product of knowing how to use themselves in a mature, professional manner in their work. One of the most important instruments one has to work with as a counsellor is oneself as a person. In preparing to become a competent counsellor, one needs to acquire knowledge about theories of personality, learn diagnostic and intervention techniques, and discover the dynamics of human behaviour.

These intervention and skills are essential but are not by themselves sufficient for establishing and maintaining effective therapeutic relationships (Corey, 2005). The

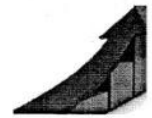


counsellor brings his/her human qualities and the experiences that have influenced him/her to every therapy session. Whether a counselor works at helping others full or part-time, the most important objective is to develop a professional attitude towards him/herself, counselees and the work. This sense of professionalism also enables cooperation with other professional helpers in an intelligent and productive manner. Human dimension is one of the most powerful determinants of the professional competence in guidance and counselling practice. As observed by Corey (2005), counsellor need not hide behind the safety of the professional role as this will make the clients hide themselves from the counsellor.

The fundamental values of counselling and psychotherapy according to British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2010) include a commitment to: respecting human rights and dignity; protecting the safety of clients; ensuring the integrity of practitioner-client relationships; enhancing the quality of professional knowledge and its application; alleviating personal distress and suffering; fostering a sense of self that is meaningful to the person(s) concerned; increasing personal effectiveness; enhancing the quality of relationships between people; appreciating the variety of human experience and culture; striving for the fair and adequate provision of counselling and psychotherapy services. A professional counselor needs a graduate-level degree from an accredited university. They should also complete supervised experience before they're allowed to practice on their own.

Counsellors who are merely technical experts leaving their own reactions, values and self out of their work ends up in sterile counselling. It is only a counsellor who is genuine and alive to his/her responsibilities that can significantly touch the lives of his clients. Counsellors should be well educated, make life oriented choices, radiate a zest for life and are real in their relationships with their clients in order to inspire them to develop these internal resources. Counsellors serve as models for the clients. Counsellors who model incongruent behaviour, low risk activity and remain hidden should know that client will imitate this behavior. Modeling realness by engaging in appropriate self disclosure as observed by Kennedy and Charles (2002), will make the client to be honest with the counsellor in therapeutic relationship.

Corey (2005) pointed out that the degree of aliveness and psychological health of the counsellor are important variables that determine the professional competence of the counsellor. It is a mark of courage for counsellors to willingly recognize and deal with their anxieties instead of denying them by pretence. A counsellor should be him/herself. He should not be bound up in maintaining stereotyped role expectations that little of them as a person shows through (VanHoose&Kotller, 1995). Counsellors should avoid perfectionism for no one is perfect except God. Counsellors need to be honest about their limitations. Silence should be acknowledged and the meaning of the client's silence should be explored



with the client. Demands from clients must be dealt with carefully by the counsellor declaring his/her expectations and boundaries from the initial counselling session.

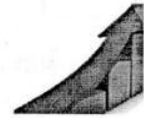
When working with involuntary clients, counsellors must begin by openly discussing the nature of the relationship. Counsellors need not promise confidentiality as well as any other factors that may affect the course of therapy. There should be optimum balance in sharing responsibility with the clients to prevent early burn out. It is not proper for counsellors to give advice but should rather help clients discover their own solutions and recognize their own freedom to act. The counsellor's job is to help clients make independent choices and accept the consequences of their choices. A counsellor must define and clarify his/her professional role as attached at various theoretical orientations. This is based on the central function of counselling which is to help clients recognize their own strengths, discover what is preventing them from using their strengths, and clarify what kind of person they want to be.

The counsellor should know that his/her role will not be defined once and for all, that he/she will have to reassess the nature of his/her role at various times. Counsellors should know how to use techniques appropriately to help clients make therapeutic progress. Corey, Corey and Callanan (1998) asserted that it is essential to understand the theoretical rationale for each technique used and to be sure the techniques are congruent with the goals of therapy. Individual counsellors need to develop his/her counselling style as there is no right way to conduct therapy due to wide variations in approach that can be effective. Borrowing from others is advocated by experts but an individual counsellor should come up with a way that is distinctive to the counsellor.

Counsellors need to periodically assess the direction of their lives to determine if they are living the way they want and should. Pope and Vasquez (1991) are of the view that counsellors need to be in tune with themselves, by having experience of centeredness and solidness and by feeling a sense of personal power; they have the basis for integrating their life experiences with their professional experiences. They concluded that such a synthesis can provide the basis for being an effective, professional competent counsellor. The focus of this paper is on a close look at the issue of professional competence in guidance and counselling practice.

Purpose and the Need for Ethical Monitoring

Ethics is one of the components of a major branch of philosophy called Axiology. Ethics deals with issues that bother on what kinds of things are right or wrong. Ethics prescribe the norms or rules for human activities and show how, according to these norms a man ought to direct his actions. Ethics are the principles and values an individual uses to govern his activities and decisions. Moreover, ethics does not only direct a man on how to act if he wishes to be morally good, but sets before him the absolute obligation he is under of



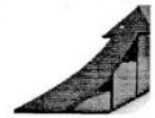
doing good and avoiding evil. Ethics has a system or method of checking moral values. It is in this light that Etuk (2003) refer to ethics as the fundamental principles of the moral law or guide.

Unlike the empirical sciences, ethics deals with what ought to be the case. The empirical sciences deals with facts only, while ethics deals with facts and values. From all this, it can be seen that, the focus of ethics is to order and re-order the life of man in the world so that the goal of life is achieved. The study of ethics enables the individual to become better human beings. The purposes of ethical codes as highlighted in Nugent (2009) are: to help clarify the professional's responsibilities to clients; help clarify the professional's responsibilities to the society; provide standards of practice to help professionals resolve conflicts between responsibilities to clients and the society; protect the public from unethical or incompetent professionals; and protect the profession from unethical practices of any of its members.

Professional ethics emanate from the definition of professions as occupations whose members receive their licenses in return for their pledge to put the interest of the served society above their own self-interests while acting in the licensed role. Professional ethics therefore is perceived as a set of principles which discusses in broad terms the professions responsibilities to the public, to clients and to fellow practitioners, and emerge for the following reasons as put forward by Jenfa (2006 : 28):

- a) it helps the counsellor to determine the propriety of his conduct in his professional relationship;
- b) it indicates the kind of professional posture the counsellor must maintain if he is to succeed;
- c) it gives clients a basis to have the confident that the professional sincerely desires to serve them well and places service above material reward;
- d) it gives clients assurance that standards of competence, independence and integrity shall remain the goal post of the counselor;
- e) it enables member bodies and regulatory authorities to fulfill their responsibility of ensuring that the professional counsellors have the capabilities and competence expected of them by employers, clients and the public; and
- f) the public interest is protected and the credibility of the profession is enhanced.

In the view of Omoregbe (1990), the most important aspect of development is the moral development of human personality. This is because no meaningful development can be possible without ethical re-orientation and standards to guide socio-political and economic



conducts of a nation. To separate ethics from society is to destroy it. Morality is the soul of society therefore; any endeavour that is carried out at the exclusion of ethics is defective.

Elements of Professionalism

Professionalism is often defined as the strict adherence to courtesy, honesty and responsibility when dealing with individuals or other companies in the business environment. An online dictionary defines professionalism as the skill, good judgment, and polite behaviour that is expected from a person who is trained to do a job well (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Professionalism can also be seen as the conducts, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person. This trait often includes a high level of excellence going above and beyond basic requirements. Professionalism is considered an important trait that all professionals should possess. The traits may vary from one profession to another, but there are several that carry over. Professionalism means sticking with something until the job is completed. One of the important features of developing professional sense is creating time for regular study. Many people who engage in counselling activity almost every day seldom consult the literature or even their textbooks.

They feel perhaps because they went through an educational system that confined learning to the length of the school session that they have completed their formal study because they have passed certain courses. It must be known that all professionals go on learning throughout their lives. This is due to the fact that learning is a skill that itself must be learned (Francis, 2016). Therefore, no matter how much experience one may have, it is always helpful to study again the particular psychological dynamics that may be involved in a current counselling responsibility. It is not out of place to assert that counsellors should recognize that on-going education is the natural state of things for all professionals at the present time. The heart of this is the desire to continue educating ourselves, to continue learning more about ourselves and the subject matter of our counselling work. For instance, if a counsellor hypothesize that a client has an obsessive compulsive personality disorder, the counsellor may turn back to some book that deals with this subject. As observed by Kennedy and Charles (2002), such reading will differ after clinical experience because the counsellor will have seen new facts of the obsessive style that he or she had not previously noticed. A thorough reading of at least one treatment of the obsessive compulsive personality will bring out added dimensions in the current counselling experience.

This type of study does not give information as if for examination, but helps one to grow into a more informed sense of oneself as a counsellor. Professionalism includes: learning every aspect of a job and doing it to the best of one's ability. Professionals look, speak, and dress accordingly to maintain an image of someone who takes pride in their behaviour and appearance. Professionals complete high quality work and are detail oriented. Professionals are accountable for their actions at all times. A professional can quickly and easily find what is needed. A professional must maintain his poise even when facing a difficult situation. For



example, if a colleague or client treats you in a belligerent manner, you should not resort to the same type of behaviour.

Professionals must adhere to a strict code of ethics in guidance and counselling. Professionals strive to become experts in their field, which sets them apart from the rest of the pack. This can mean continuing your education by taking courses, attending seminars and attaining any related professional designations. Responding to people promptly and following through on promises in a timely manner is also important, as this demonstrates reliability. Professionals complete projects as soon as possible and avoid letting uncompleted projects pile up. Elements of professionalism include all of the behaviour above in addition to providing a positive role model for others.

Competence and Responsibility

Competence is one of the components of ethical issues in guidance and counselling. Competence is the ability to identify requirements in complex situations and to solve complex tasks through the activation of specialist knowledge, skills, experiences, feelings, values, interests and motivations, and to act independently and purposefully according to the analysis of the situation (Maughan, Coyle, McGowan, and Wroe 2016). Competence is defined as the effective deployment of the skills and knowledge needed to do what is required (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy 2010). Competence further comprises the ability to (self) critically reflect and assess one's activities regarding the situation and results, in order to learn from future challenges. The acquisition of these competencies is a life-long task of personal and professional development underpinned by a willingness to engage constantly in reflexive practice in order to master the theoretical knowledge and skills base required.

Counsellors in seeking to facilitate effective functioning through the application of scientific and professional principles, method and techniques have the obligation to maintain the highest standards of competences, and clients on this basis have the right to receive services of the highest quality. Competence according to Carroll, Schneider and Wesley (2005) is commonly defined in terms of formal education, professional training and supervised experience in the knowledge and techniques necessary to effect desired change. Encarta dictionaries online defines competence as the ability to do something well, measured against a standard, especially ability acquired through experience or training. The counsellor's awareness of ethical and practice guidelines for the delivery of specific counselling services is as critical as knowledge and understanding of the local and state laws that govern one's practice.

Counsellors are required to practice only within the boundaries of their competence. Counsellors need to maintain and enhance their professional competence through various

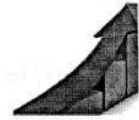


forms of continuing education. Counsellors must limit their practice to their demonstrated areas of competence as defined by verifiable training and experience given the extensive array of settings in which professional service are provided. As observed by Nugent (2009), competent professional service includes the counsellor's sensitivity to his or her own implicit biases and to overcoming stereotypic thinking and value judgements based on gender, race, age or sexual orientation. Equally important is the knowledge and understanding of the client's socio-cultural background and situational demands. The counsellor must guard against interpreting a client's problems in terms of group rather than individual factors and characteristics.

Counsellors must obtain pertinent training/appropriate supervision when extending services beyond the range of their usual practice. Where there is little or no established opportunity to gain such experiences, empirical validation and discussion of treatment options with experienced colleagues is required (Pope & Vasquez, 2011). Counsellors should alert clients when they are utilizing techniques that are new if therapeutically feasible. Services should not be withheld from potential clients on the basis of race, gender, national, origin or sexual orientation. However, they may be a situation where the counsellor can withhold services if offering such services would require going outside one's area of demonstrated competence: for example where a battery of neuropsychological tests rather than standard psychological test are appropriate for the client's presenting problem, refer to the expert in such tests.

In the course of counselling, new problems may arise that differ dramatically from those presented by the client at the outset of treatment. For example, a client may have requested career counselling, but later reveal that he or she is a substance abuser. The counsellor must decide in such a situation whether he or she can handle the situation or should be referred to a specialist in the particular area of concern. To practice competently also means that counsellors must monitor their own psychological health so that personal distress or dysfunction does not impair their ability to provide adequate services (Maughan, Coyle, McGowan & Wroe, 2016). The reason is that personal problems under most professional ethics codes do not exercise incompetence. Counsellors need to be alert to signs of fatigue or burn out that may interfere with professional effectiveness. They need to be aware that the work of counselling itself may sometimes produce stress that may temporarily impair the quality of services.

Competence is defined as the effective deployment of the skills and knowledge needed to do what is required (Merriam Webster, 2017). In particular, counsellors are required to practice **only** within the boundaries of their competence and sticking to this is a sign of integrity and **putting** the clients' interests. Competence in counselling includes plans for interruptions in **services** and arranging coverage by qualified colleagues: counsellors that are effective, **economical** and humane. There should be ongoing evaluation of service goals and outcomes



as an integral part of counselling activities. Terminating of services if the results cannot be improved is part of the counsellor's responsibility. The counsellor must provide the reasons for termination, the number and goals of sessions remaining, the nature of follow-up and an appropriate referral. Counsellors must be aware of their level of competence. They must not attempt to counsel individuals who have problems that require knowledge or skills beyond their qualifications.

Counselling Profession and the Role of Professional Association

The practice of Counselling as a helping profession is recorded in many books that have been written by the Founding Fathers of Counselling Association of Nigeria. Much of the history captures how Reverend Sisters at St. Theresa's College, Ibadan Western Nigeria in the 1950's and 1960's institutionalized the events of Careers Day for students as a platform for motivating them for appropriate career choices (Makinde, 1986). Counselling is a professional service provided by a competent counsellor, psychologist, or other mental health specialist that is intended to promote individual adaptability to changing life demands by helping clients to develop or enhance a variety of personal-social, coping and decision making skills or by helping clients to alter dysfunctional or undesired patterns of living.

Professional counsellor training prepares counsellors to engage in direct counseling with individuals, groups or families experiencing stress in everyday living resulting from normal developmental conflicts. Counsellor training orients counsellors to engage in psychological education, consultation and social change to improve the overall mental health climate in a work setting or community (Fisher & Hennessy, 2009). Counsellors are considered members of a profession because their services meet the essential criteria that determine if an occupational group constitutes a profession. These criteria as stated in Nugent (2009) require that members: perform a unique service; be trained in special skills and knowledge; have an explicit code of ethics to monitor the profession; be bound by certain legal standards; have the power to perform their service as they describe it; have the ability and take responsibility to assess and upgrade the practice of the profession.

In pursuing these objectives, counsellors recognize that their interventions hold the potential for great benefit as well as considerable harm to their clients and, therefore, are aware of the standards for practice stipulated by the professional organization to which they belong. Professions are initiated, shaped and nurtured by the activities of professional associations made up of members who are dedicated to developing definitions and standards for the profession and are willing to monitor these standards (Francis, 2016). These standards according to Fisher and Hennessy (2009) describe to the public and to other related professions the services offered and the recommended qualifications. They serve as information to help guide consumers as to what is sound, ethical and practice. The legal responsibilities for a profession through credentialing, certification, or licensing of members in practice are determined by the state legislatures.



The standard of professional associations is used to set the legal standard which makes the profession attain a legal status. These procedures apply to all professionals offering human services to the public, including professional counsellors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians and nurses. These professional organizations concerned with the delivery of counselling services have codified these standards into statements generally referred to as ethical principles which has competence and responsibility as its components. Ethical principles as observed by Fisher and Hennessy (2009) are manifestations of a profession's efforts to guide and regulate the practices of members of that profession. These principles hold that counsellors have ultimate ethical responsibility for the procedures and outcomes of their services.

It further holds that counsellors must strive to promote the welfare and respect the rights and dignity of those with whom they work. Professional association is a body of persons engaged in the same profession, formed usually to control entry into the profession, maintain standards and represent the profession in discussions with other bodies (Collins, 2014). It is an organization formed to unite and inform people who work in the same occupation. Members are bounded together as they advocate for their peers and share their challenges and triumphs among one another. Professional association according to Wikipedia is usually a non-profit organization seeking to further a particular profession, the interest of individuals engaged in that profession and the public interest.

Professional associations, according to British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2010) address her concerns for education in their respective fields in a variety of ways: through programming at conferences and meetings; through the sponsorship or conduct of education-related research, individually or in cooperation with other agencies; through publication programmes; through provision of continuing education opportunities; through certification of members; and through the development and adoption of standards for professional education and the implementation of an accreditation of programmes. The standards and the accrediting activities of associations are the major, formal way in which these associations attempt to identify and acknowledge an agreed upon level of excellence in professional education. Accreditation deals with institutions or programmes, and is a status granted to an institution or programme that has been found to meet or exceed stated criteria of educational quality.

Professional associations provide unparalleled *networking opportunities*, allowing individuals to connect with their peers, mentors, and other industry leaders. As a member, one is in the unique position to attend conventions, seminars, award dinners and other related events with like-minded professionals in the field. These events are attended by the brightest minds and are a hotbed of ideas and collaborative efforts. An association's annual meeting represents an incredible opportunity for one to meet and network with the largest gathering of one's peers during the year. Networking with professionals outside one's place of



employment can give one a broader perspective on the profession in general. Listening to the experiences of others leaves one feeling energized and refreshed with the feeling that one is not alone in the fight.

Conclusion

Attempt was made to stress the importance of the issue of professional competence in guidance and counseling practice. Each professional organization observes certain ethical standards which guide the performance of members, govern their preparation or training and serve as legal, constitutional and ethical controls. The counselling profession is not an exception. The over-arching standard in the ethical principles of all counselling professions is that the counsellor protects the integrity, dignity and welfare of the client regardless of who the client is. Instead of worrying about the ways they can get in trouble, counsellors should think about ethics as a way of asking - how can I be even better in my practice? The reason being that good ethical practice is good professional practice. When psychologists do end up in ethical quandaries, it's often because they unwittingly slid too far down a slippery slope--a result of ignorance about their ethical obligations or thinking they could handle a situation that spiraled out of control. Conclusively, counsellors must maintain accurate knowledge and expertise in areas of responsibility, maintain professional growth through continuing education, and provide only those services for which qualified and trained.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made on how to maintain competence and practice within the ethical codes of guidance and counseling:

1. Newly-graduated counsellors, even seasoned counselors must consult other professionals. It's tempting to try to solve everything on one's own, but consultation is now the cornerstone of good, ethical counseling practice.
2. Counsellors should strive to become experts in their field, which sets them apart from the rest of the pack as the world of the professional counselor continues to evolve, whether the setting is private practice, school counseling, agency counseling or myriad other counseling venues..
3. Counsellors should demonstrate reliability by responding to people promptly and follow through on promises in a timely manner.
4. Counsellors should adhere to a strict code of ethics even if their company or industry doesn't have a written code, they should display ethical behaviour at all times.



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