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THE PLACE OF ETHICS IN COUNSELLING SERVICES: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE.

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Abstract

Counselling profession like other fields is not free from ethical considerations thus, the main preoccupation of counselling ethics is the application of ethical principles in the counselling practice. This paper examines of ethics in counseling services. The study is a qualitative research and relies on secondary sources. It is descriptive in nature. It is found in the paper that, counseling has a set of ethical codes that govern the profession, thus ethical decisions cannot be avoided. Whenever counsellors make a clinical decision, they are almost always making an ethical decision, consciously or not. Counsellors are expected to uphold the well-being of clients in general, not just their own patients. This means they have a duty to report a counsellor who is abusing drugs or molesting patients. Counsellors are to act in the best interest of their client, promoting client goals, protecting client rights, maximising good and minimizing harm. The study, therefore, recommends: There is need for counsellors to pay a special attention to ethical issues related to their practice. Counsellors need to be truthful and open when necessary to their patients on issues concerning them. And there is need for strict adherence to principles of ethics in counselling practice.

Keywords: **Ethics, Counseling Profession, Ethical Codes, Counselee, Nigeria.**

Introduction

Ethics applies to every area of human endeavour and as such counseling is not an exception. Effective counselling deals with ethical understanding, legal responsibilities and moral realities. Counselling does not take place in a fantasy world, but in a world of reality where people are required to make ethical choices and decisions. Adherence to professional ethical standards protects both the public and the counsellor. This paper examines the imperativeness of ethics in counseling with particular reference to the Nigerian society.

Conceptual Clarifications

Counselling

Counseling refers to helping process that uses the safety of a special relationship between the counsellor and the counselee-who together explore the thoughts, feelings and counsellor attitudes of the counselee with the objective of tapping the resources within the counselee to effect healing and change. Counseling is defined as an interactive process conjoining the counselee who needs assistance and the counselor who is trained and educated to give this assistance (Grant, 1992).

Stein (1990) defines counseling as a process in which the counselor assists the counselee to make interpretations of facts relating to a choice, plan, or adjustments which he needs to make. Counseling is also defined as a process which takes place in a one to one relationship between an individual beset by problems with which he cannot cope alone and a professional worker whose training and experience have qualified him to help others reach solutions to various types of personal difficulties (Clakson, 2001).

Effective counseling consists of a definitely structured permissive relationship which allows the client to gain an understanding of himself to a degree which enables him to take positive steps in the light of his new orientation. There was a college student who underwent a couple of sessions in his college with his college counselor. He approached her because he felt he had a severe inferiority complex. But during the sessions, he discovered that beneath his inferiority complex, lay an arrogant individual. This revelation helped him to chalk out specific steps to work and change himself.

A recent description of counseling psychology (1999) defines the specialty in part: "Counseling psychologists help people with physical, emotional, and mental disorders, improve well-being, alleviate distress and maladjustment, and resolve crises. . . . Practitioners provide assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of psychopathology". Although the complete definition is very expansive, prevention is not directly stated as an area of expertise or study. The focus is definitely on remediation and corrective activities.

The Counsellor and Counselling

The counsellor in this context is a professionally trained teacher and therapist who should be working in the secondary school. The role of the teacher counselor revolved around employing new skills to aid the client/learner through the "dark entangled forest" (unknown) of his/her personality and society. Schools can help in terms of offering counselling or interpreting it in a broad way, by integrating it into the ethos of the school, and offer individual or group counselling. Lang (1993) agrees that for Secondary school, effectiveness in counselling depend on counselling being considered in its broad sense, and integrate it into a whole school approach. Whether integrated, group or individual, the counselling process should be handled sensitively and discreetly.

Counselling aims at empowering the individual. The counsellor requires professional training to accomplish this task successfully. Castillo (1978) acknowledges that anyone who hopes a child to mature must first get to know and accept him for he is. Otherwise success will evade even his/her best affairs. Makewa (2008) concedes that it is important to understand the youth's world as a counsellor. The counsellor is then able to help them better when they understand them and that boys and girls are easier to build than it is to mend men and woman.

A counsellor should have an interest and consuming desire to relieve distress and assist people lead more fulfilling lives. The counsellor must go beyond mere interest in the subject and equip him or herself with the relevant knowledge. Ndirangu (2000) concedes that the counsellor should be well grounded in clinical psychology where it is dictated by the maxim that all behavior is caused.

The counsellor requires knowledge of some culture values and beliefs of most of the clientele he or she handles within the learning institution. This is crucial because cultural misinterpretation may mean long-term damage to the client. It is not a wonder then that the Map-Robinson Report (1987) comments that guidance and counselling for individuals has always formed part of the African strategy for combining personality problems and may be practiced by indigenous counsellors. The Witmer (1990) Report endorses this argument by remarking that counsellors should always be cognizant of the cultural conditions and changes.

Counsellor should design comprehensive guidance programmes, provide counseling service and use assessment procedures with a gender perspective. Lack of training of counsellors in gender analysis may lead many providers of guidance to render services and/or organize activities that may continue to maintain and enforce the already existing stereotype. Counselling skills are learned over time and should be practiced by a professional counsellor as much as possible. Counselling is a purposeful process which leads client to move understandings of themselves and other; the counsellor should therefore be conversant with the listening skill.

The Concept of Ethics and Counselling Ethics

Ethics are a set of moral principles or rules of conduct for an individual or group. The term ethics comes from the Greek ethos meaning custom, habit or character. Ethics determine choices made. In counselling, ethics underpin the nature and course of actions taken by the counsellor. Counsellors and others in helping professions are expected to behave in an ethical manner.

By nature of the profession, counsellors are to act in the best interest of their client, promoting client goals, protecting client rights, maximizing good and minimizing harm (Stein, 1990). This expectation broadens due to the inherent power of the relationship between client and counsellor. Ethics including ethical codes and principles aim to balance the power and ensure that the counsellor operates for the good of the client and not for self.

Primarily, counsellors' duty of care is to their clients. When making ethical choices, counsellors must consider not only themselves, but also the agency or organisation (if not self-employed), their profession and the greater community (Witmer, 1990). Counselling does not occur in a vacuum therefore it is important that counsellors acknowledge all facets of their practice both internally and externally.

Ross (2002) draws on this further by asking counselors to look at ethics from a holistic perspective – body (the environment, structures, systems, policies, laws, regulations, moral codes, and societal norms), mind (ethical thinking, philosophy), heart (relationships, emotions, values) and spirit (unknowing, unconscious). A complete awareness of the ethics of a situation can occur when all are taken into consideration.

Foundational Principles

The five bedrock principles of autonomy, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence, and fidelity are each vital to a healthy counselling relationship. According to Millerand Davis (2008), descriptions of each of the five foundational principles are as follows:

Autonomy is the principle that addresses respect for independence and self-determination. The essence of this principle is allowing an individual the freedom of choice and action. It addresses the responsibility of the counsellor to encourage clients, when appropriate, to make their own decisions and to act on their own values.

There are two important considerations in encouraging clients to be autonomous. First, helping clients to understand how their decisions and values may be received within the context of the society in which they live, and how they may impinge on the rights of others.

The second consideration is related to the client's ability to make sound and rational decisions. Persons, who are not capable of making competent choices, such as children and some individuals with mental disabilities, should not be allowed to act on decisions that could harm themselves or others.

Justice does not mean treating all individuals the same. If an individual is to be treated differently, the counsellor needs to be able to offer a rationale that explains the necessity and appropriateness of treating the individual differently. An example of justice: a counsellor working with a client that is blind would go through the form with that individual orally, instead of giving him or her a standard written form to fill out. But the counsellor would treat him the same as any other client in all other regards.

Beneficence reflects the counsellor's responsibility to contribute to the welfare of the client. Simply stated, it means to do good, to be proactive, and also prevent harm when possible. Beneficence can come in many forms, such as early intervention actions that contribute to the betterment of clients.

Non-maleficence is the concept of not causing harm to others. Often explained as "above all, do no harm," this principle reflects both the idea of not inflicting intentional harm, and not engaging in actions that risk harming others. Weighing potential harm against potential benefits is important in a counsellor's efforts toward ensuring "no harm."

Fidelity involves the principles of loyalty, faithfulness, and honouring commitments. Clients must be able to trust the counsellor and have faith in the therapeutic relationship if growth is to occur. Therefore, the counsellor must take care not to threaten the therapeutic relationship or to leave obligations unfulfilled.

The Association of Cooperative Counselling Therapists of Canada (ACCT) is dedicated to providing the highest standards of professional counselling and consulting services. ACCT Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice provide guidelines and standards for Registered Therapeutic Counsellors, RTCs/Accredited Counsellors to pursue excellence in providing their professional services (Millerand Davis2008).

ACCT Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice provide a moral framework for making decisions when ethical dilemmas arise. It is not possible to anticipate or regulate every ethical dilemma and reasonable differences of opinion can and do exist in regard to ethical decisions. Therefore, these guidelines are intended to be used as part of an ethical decision-making process, including consulting with knowledgeable resources, such as ACCT Ethics committee,

trusted colleagues, research, or other reliable sources. These guidelines and standards do not take the place of legal advice, which must be obtained from a lawyer. It is also important to consider personal values and whether they may in any way unfairly bias one's perceptions and decision-making.

Code of Ethics

Ethics mean moral principles that control or influence a person's behavior a philosophical discipline that is concerned with human conduct and moral decision making. According to Akinade (2005) ethics are normative in nature and focus on principles and standard that governs relationships between individuals, such as counselors and clients.

The concept of ethics relates to moral consideration. The challenge lies in what is considered moral or ethical. Each counsellor comes to the profession with their own set of values and standards. Individual principles and how they were used to interpret dilemmas would be universally different. Therefore, a Code of Ethics – a general standard that counsellors and therapists adhere to and use co jointly with legal standards to provide ethical practice and work through ethical dilemmas – is required.

Ethical codes offer counsellors an outline of what are considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. In a region (such as Nigeria) where counselling is not regulated through licensing, ethical codes provide a valuable tool for developing and maintaining ethical conduct.

Numerous professional associations have developed their own Code of Conduct and Ethics. Codes may adopt similar principles whilst also covering behaviours specific to an area of counselling. Professional counseling organisations provide Codes of Conduct and Ethics to members and the inability to stick to these Codes may result in removal of membership.

A professional may belong to more than one organisation and thus have access to additional ethical codes. When faced with an ethical dilemma, a counsellor is to consider all available and applicable codes. It is counsellors' responsibility to familiarise themselves with relevant codes and regulations governing their area of practice.

Clarkson (2001) contends that all members of a professional association subscribe (at least in principle) to their professional Code of Ethics for the sake of protecting the public. The degree to which this 'protection' occurs is based on four factors:
Client awareness and knowledge of the Code of Ethics and the complaints procedure
The degree to which the client feels they can discuss his or her feelings about a violation with the counsellor.

The fairness of the Codes

The client's ability to manage the Code or gain assistance in negotiation

In summary, Ethics determine choices and underpin actions; Counsellors by nature and duty of profession are to act in an ethical manner. Good ethical conduct is grounded in an understanding and awareness of ethical codes, a desire to do the right thing and a basis of sound moral principles (Bradley, n.d). Individualism is to be tempered against legal and ethical codes, as well as expectations based in culture and society.

As a Registered Therapeutic Counsellor (also includes Master Therapeutic Counsellor and Registered Counselling Supervisor) and member of ACCT I commit:

- To protect the welfare of my clients and make reasonable efforts to ensure my services are used appropriately.
- To treat all clients with respect and unconditional acceptance.
- To consistently complete a comprehensive assessment at the beginning of the counselling relationship.
- To never exploit a client's trust and to avoid dual relationships.
- To report the sexual or physical abuse of a child to the authorities.
- To avoid overt or suggested sexual contact with clients and former clients.
- To terminate counselling services when appropriate or requested by the client(s).
- To respect the right of clients to autonomy.
- To provide a private and safe setting for counselling.
- To request payment for service, only after consent for service has been given.
- To ensure proper self-care.
- To maintain healthy boundaries with clients.
- To obtain assistance and refer clients when appropriate.
- To clearly disclose confidentiality limitations, facts about services offered and financial policies.
- To be aware of and comply with relevant laws for the delivery of counselling services, including electronic services.
- To maintain client confidentiality, except where there is written consent, danger to self or others or as required by law.
- To carefully assess, develop a safety plan, and document the potential suicidal or homicidal behaviour by a client.
- To maintain accurate and adequate session and financial records.
- To continue to grow and develop as a professional counsellor.
- To avoid conflicts of interest.
- To avoid giving or receiving gifts of substantial value.
- To be aware of the influence my public statements may have.
- To deal appropriately with the unethical behaviour of another counsellor.
- To accept that I cannot realistically expect to succeed with every client.
- To promote my services professionally and accurately (Millerand Davis2008).

Importance of Ethical Codes in Counselling

Ethical codes, or standards, are designed to provide guidelines for behaviour. Ethical codes serve several purposes:

1. They protect members from practices that may result in public condemnation.
2. They provide a measure of self-regulation, thus giving members a certain freedom and autonomy.
3. They provide clients a degree of protection from cheats and the incompetent.
4. They help to protect counsellors from the public if they are sued for malpractice.

Ethics code provides a common set of principles and standards upon which counselors build their professional and scientific work. Counselors, like all professionals, have ethical

responsibilities and obligations. The principal rule supporting ethical obligations is that the counselor must act with full recognition of the importance of client's rights, the ethics of the profession. Counseling is not a value-free or neutral activity (Grant, 1992). "It is a profession based on values, which are orienting beliefs about what is good...and how that good should be achieved" (Bergin, 1985), the relationship of moral standards and values, individual or cultural, in the life of that client. General principles are inspirational in nature. Their intent is to guide and inspire counselors toward the very highest ethical ideals of the profession.

In Nigeria, some professional ethics are not taken serious like in the field of counseling but when professional counselors stick to the ethics governing the counseling profession, the results in seen in the following ways:

Respect for People's Rights and Dignity: Counselors respect the dignity and worth of all people and the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality and self-determination. Counselors are aware that special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair autonomous decision-making (Kabir, 2017). Counselors are aware of and respect cultural, individual and role differences including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language and socio economic status and consider these factors when working with members of such groups. Counselors try to eliminate the effect on their work of biases based on those factors and they do not knowingly participate in or condone activities of others based upon such prejudices.

Personal Moral Qualities: The practitioner's personal moral qualities are of the utmost importance to clients. Many of the personal qualities considered important in the provision of services have an ethical or moral component and are therefore considered as virtues or good personal qualities. It is inappropriate to prescribe that all practitioners possess these qualities, since it is concerned and developed out of personal commitment rather than the requirement of an external authority. Personal qualities to which counselors and psychotherapists are strongly encouraged to aspire include -

Essentials of Counseling Empathy: The ability to communicate understanding of another person's experience from that person's perspective. Sincerity: A personal commitment to consistency between what is professed and what is done.

Integrity: Commitment to being moral in dealings with others, personal straight forwardness, honesty and coherence.

Resilience: The capacity to work with the client's concerns without being personally diminished.

Respect: Showing appropriate esteem to others and their understanding of themselves.

Humility: The ability to asses accurately and acknowledge one's own strengths and weakness.

Competence: The effective deployment of the skills and knowledge needed to do what is required.

Fairness: The consistent application of appropriate criteria to inform decisions and actions.

Wisdom: Possession of sound judgment that inform practice.

Courage: The capacity to act in spite of known fears, risks and uncertainty.

Principles Govern Confidentiality: Schneider's (1963) terms the information revealed in counseling an "entrusted secret". He provided seven general principles governing confidentiality and communication –

a) Obligation of confidentiality is relative rather than absolute since there are conditions which can alter it.
b) Confidentiality depends on the nature of the material.
c) Harmless material does not bind the counselor to confidentiality.
d) Material necessary for a counselor/agency to function effectively is often released from the bonds of confidentiality.
e) Intrinsic right of the counselee to his/her integrity and reputation -Confidentiality is always conditioned by the intrinsic right of the counselee to his/her integrity and reputation, to the secret, and to resist aggression. Such rights can be protected by the counselor even against the law.
f) Confidentiality is also limited by the rights of the counselor to preserve his/her own reputation and integrity, to resist harm or aggression, and to preserve privileged communication. g) Limited by the rights of an innocent third party/community.

Limitations of Confidentiality
Suspected child abuse must be reported.
Threats to harm others must be reported.

Rationale for Confidentiality-Need for balance between the rights of the individual and the safety of society (Denkowski & Denkowski, 1982) with specific attention to the importance of counselors keeping up-to-date with the legal status of confidentiality.

In special circumstances, it is the duty to warn whenever the counselor has reasonable knowledge that a client's conduct may be harmful to self or to another.

Professionals inform clients of the limits of confidentiality prior to the onset of helping relationship.

Obligations to Warn and Protect: In the case of special circumstances, it is the obligation of the counselor to warn the related people/ family members. A few examples are given below:

- Incest and Child abuse.
- Serious danger to others: e.g., in case of HIV-positive client. This as a new standard was added in 1995 in ACA code of ethics.

- Runaway plan of a child client must be reported to the parents.
- Students' violation of confidentiality.
- Harm-to-self. Most suicides can be prevented if we learn to recognize, evaluate, and intervene effectively in crises situations.

Ethical Codes and Guidelines

Ethics are suggested standards of conduct based on a consensus value set. Ethical standards are generally formalized in terms of a code of ethics. As the group emerges in its development toward professionalism, it requires formulation of code of ethics for safe practice of the profession. Professional bodies of counseling have developed ethical standards which they have made available to the practitioners (Kabir, 2017). Professional organizations for practicing counseling and psychotherapy exist in many countries and in each case, members who were directly involved in writing the code reviewed and examined a wide range of ethical behavior and problems of professional practice.

Ethical Issues and Dilemmas

Client Rights: Respecting the Client's Autonomy and Diversity. Following problems can occur, if client's rights for freedom are not respected-

- Fostering dependence in clients
- Counselor having a hard time terminating a case
- Challenging clients to do for themselves what they are unable to do
- Keeping helping process mysterious
- Discrimination. Client Rights: Informed Consent
- Involves the rights of clients to be informed about what their relationships with the counselor will entail and to make autonomous decisions.
- Starts with intake interview and continues for the duration of the relationship.
- Usually comprehensive written statements are used (ACA Code of Ethics).

Client Rights: Confidentiality is considered as a central concept in the client-helper relationship. The greatest single source of ethical dilemma in counseling results from questions of confidentiality.

- Confidentiality needs to be discussed with clients from the onset of the relationship.
- Minor or incompetent clients -Counselors act in the best interest of those unable to give voluntary consent.
- Records- Provide access to records when requested by clients
- Disclosure of transfer: Permission to record.
- Anonymity in research.
- Respect for privacy in consultation. Unethical Behavior
- Unethical behavior can take many forms-
- Violation of confidentiality.
- Exceeding one's level of professional competence-Competence refers to the ability to perform effectively. Therapists must limit their service to their training and experience. Claiming expertise one does not possess relates to the violation of this ethical standard.

- Imposing one's values on a client.

Essentials of Counseling also be clear how to deal with disclosure by a family relative. For example, if husband has AIDS, it is essential that the wife is informed about that fact. Similarly, if an adolescent son is taking drugs and he confides in the counselor, it is pertinent for the counselor to inform the parents about his drug-taking because of the likely serious consequences (Kabir, 2018). Some counselors believe that secrets within a family are counterproductive, while others do believe that the information should be kept private and confidential. The decision really depends on the gravity of the situation and the likely consequences of confidentiality.

Group work: When the counselor is working in a group, s/he should clearly inform the group members to respect confidentiality of each other and to maintain group-ground rules. On the first place, the counselor should select group members with compatible needs and goals. S/he must also ensure that reasonable precautions are taken to protect the clients from any physical or psychological trauma from other members of the group. Professional Responsibility Knowledge of Standards Counselors practicing the profession should have knowledge about the following –

- Knowledge about standards code of ethics.
- Professional competence-The counselor should have professional competence to practice the profession. Following competencies are required in this respect-
- Boundaries of competence-A counselor should work within boundaries of his/her competencies, that is, education, experience, personal awareness, skills, specialty areas, etc. Seek out peer supervision to evaluate their efficacy.
- Monitor effectiveness-seek out peer supervision to evaluate their efficacy.
- Continuing education is essential to get oneself up-dated in the field.
- Impairment-refrain from professional service when their problems (emotional, unfinished business) could harm the clients.

Advertising and Soliciting Clients

- Accurate advertising.
- Testimonials-Advertising should accurately state one's educational background and experiences.
- Statements by others if quoted somewhere should be realistic and accurate to one's credentials.
- Products and training advertisements should be clearly stated and advertised to potential clients.
- Professional association involvement-The counselor should have a membership of professional associations and also advertise it correctly. Credentials
- Inspection: An agency periodically examines the practice of profession.
- Registration: Submission of information to the concerned authority is required for getting oneself registered as a practicing counselor.

Certification

Last two of the credential requirements (certification and licensure) have considerable prestige. The person meets the minimum skills necessary to engage in that profession. To get

a certificate in counseling, a person has to usually pass a competency test and also submit some letters of reference. Minimum of semester hours of graduate study from an accredited institution is usually required, in which a person has to usually study the following courses -growth, group work, research, theories, ethics, etc. Moreover, minimum of two academic terms' supervised experience is required. It may consist 100 hours of face to face supervision plus 3000 client contact hours.

Licensure

Licensure is required for title protection. This requires similar educational and practical experiences as described above for certification. A person must get license for practicing legally once licensure requirements are established. This is usually required by some agencies or organizations in which a person desires to practice.

- Evaluation, Assessment and Interpretation
- Competence to use and interpret tests.
- Explanations to clients -If the counselor will be well aware about the important tests used in counseling, s/he will be able to explain and thus satisfy their clients.
- Diagnosis of mental disorders.
- Test selection.
- Knowledge about diversity in testing is required. Moreover one needs to have sufficient knowledge regarding use of psychological tests across cultures.
- Test scoring and interpretation.

For professional practice of counseling to be upheld in Nigeria, these regulations and ethical code must be strictly ad held to. Professional conduct is a hallmark every profession and the practice counseling can never be left out. Considering the important role that ethics play in the practice of counseling and counseling services, it place can never be overemphasized.

Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations:

1. There is need for counsellors to pay a special attention to ethical issues related to their practice.
2. Counsellors need to be truthful and open when necessary to their patients on issues concerning them.
3. There is need for strict adherence to principles of ethics in counselling practice.

Conclusion

Counselling profession like other fields is not free from ethical considerations thus, the main preoccupation of counselling ethics is the application of ethical principles in the counselling practice. Ethical decisions can change over time. The values that inform a particular ethical decision may change, or the implications of a particular decision may sink in. Ethical decisions cannot be avoided. Whenever counsellors make a clinical decision, they are almost always making an ethical decision, consciously or not. Rather than not thinking about the ethical dimension of your care, it makes more sense to be aware of it and make sure it is sound. Counsellors are expected to uphold the well-being of clients in general, not just their own

patients. This means they have a duty to report a counsellors who is abusing drugs or molesting patients.

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