

Ethical Issues in Professional Counselling Practice in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper discussed ethical issues in relation to counselling practice. It examined the ethical needs and the moral principles necessary for determining the rightness and wrongness of counselling activities/decisions for effective practicing. Counselling practice is guided by code of ethics and standards which provides a common base for the application and interpretations of an assessment and evaluation tools in counselling service. Practicing counsellor needs some ethical guidelines as code of conduct, the constitutions and other regulatory rules for conforming standard. Ethics remain the backbone of counselling in unfolding complicated interconnected worldwide technological advancement that made changes in life style of humanity. Suggestions were made at the end to ensure sound professional counselling practice with satisfactory ethical compliance.

Keywords: ethics, code, practice, profession and standard

Introduction

Ethical issue is important in counselling practice, just like other professions. Ethics has been defined as the moral principles that determine the rightness or wrongness of action. It is primarily concerned with human conduct and moral decision-marking. It can also be seen as rules of behaviour based on ideas about what is morally good and bad. Mburza and Lawan (2006) refer to ethics as an individual's use of reason and objectivity in determining the "rightness" or "wrongness" of conduct towards other individuals. Ethical codes are derived from ethics. Ethical codes are rules of conduct conforming to a recognized standard that empower members of a professional association to operate with the highest level of integrity thus promoting professional standards.

In every profession or group, there is a code of ethics, also called ethical codes, which are laid down to regulate the members' conduct and behaviour. This is applicable in most professions including the Civil Service, Military, Medical practice, Teaching, Journalism, Religious groups etc. These codes are set rules of

conduct recognized in respect of a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, settings, etc.

The code of ethics for any professional body emphasizes the type of behaviour expected from members; it therefore regulates the conduct of the members and protect the good name and reputation of that particular group or profession. Professions owe it as their responsibility to specify, to their members and those involved in the profession, certain ways and manners of behaving. Mburza and Lawan (2006) state that an act of misbehaviour exhibited by a member of a profession becomes indelible forever in the minds of those offended and that within a relatively short period, the estimation of that profession is devalued.

Counselling ethics is widely recognized as professional principles that regulate counselling standard and very essential for counselling practices. Amongst what guides professional counselling practitioners are the codes, ethics or norms that states counsellor's rights/privileges, expectations/responsibilities. Thus, the counsellors endeavour to obey not only the laws but also regulations, professional principles and standards in compliance with professional and regulatory codes, rules of conduct, fiducially and legal responsibilities, organizational rules and procedures and other relevant standards for practice (NHS, 2001).

According to Akinade (2012) counselling ethics are codes that offer standards of principles, roadmaps for current and future health professionals to follow in their day to day practice. Counsellors work with clients both in group and individual settings. They give professional counselling concerning educational, vocational and personal-social issues. It is important to note that counselling professionals have always known and abided by ethics for greater performance and efficiency. Gibson and Mitchell (2014) stated that a code of ethics provides structure or guidelines for a profession's membership to follow in professional practice and also for the public to anticipate in interactions with the profession and its membership.

Counselling Ethics

According to the National Teachers Institute (2000), ethics are moral principles which an individual or group of persons may hold because they regard those principles as being in accordance with good conduct. The possession of a set of moral principles that guides the conduct of people within a profession is one of the major characteristics of a profession. The ultimate objective of ethics is to stipulate standard of behavior towards clients, public and fellow members of the profession. Tseuve and Lekke (2018) relate ethics to counselling practice as principles or conducts that are generally accepted by guidance counsellors as a guide in counselling process.

Ethics are not legal documents but rather principles that have their root in morality. Usman, Abdu and Abdu (2008) stressed that ethical code and principles aim to balance the power and ensure that the counsellor operates for the good of the client and not for himself. However, when making ethical choices, counsellors must consider not only themselves, but also their profession and the entire society. Kohli and Das in Umar, Abubakar and Malan (2018) elaborated that counselling is not a strictly regulated profession in some places, ethical standards however is a method of guiding and monitoring the quality of the services provided by the counsellors, quality of training provided to the counsellors and the duty of protecting the client. It also serves as standards which provide conduct guidelines for professionals. Again, it serves the purpose of structuring the counselling services, providing professional descriptions on service boundaries, amongst others.

Purpose of Ethical Code

According to Maisamari (1996), the purposes of ethics are:

1. Guiding layman in seeking to understand professional conduct.
2. Regulating the relationship between practitioners and client.
3. Distinguishing the scrupulous from unscrupulous practitioners.
4. Acquainting members with his professional obligations, privileges and rights.
5. Protecting the competent ethical practitioners from unjust attack.
6. Protecting reputation of the profession as a whole when code of ethics is violated by one or several of the members.

The Need for Code of Ethics in Counselling practice

There are a number of reasons why professional counsellors should behave ethically. For the purpose of code of conduct in counselling, Elaigwu (2005) in Tseuve and Lekke (2018) highlighted the following as the justifications for having code of ethics:

1. To provide a position on the standard of practice to assist each member of the profession in deciding what he should do when situations of conflicts arise in his work.
2. To help clarify the counsellors' responsibilities to the client and protect the client from the counsellors' violation or failure to fulfil these responsibilities.
3. To give the profession some assurance that the practice of members will not be detrimental to its general functions and purposes.
4. To give the society some guarantee that the services of the counsellor will demonstrate a sensible regard for the social codes and moral expectation of the community in which he works.
5. To offer the counsellor some moral ground for safeguarding his privacy and integrity.

Akinade (2012) grouped reasons for requiring ethics into personal, external and aspirational reasons. Personal reasons, according to Akinade, are likely to be overlooked in high flown discussion of ethics. However, each person has personal reactions to personal actions, and usually feel positive or not to feel guilty about personal behaviour. External reactions are more compelling. Professionals are expected not to infringe the criminal law; they are to try and avoid civil litigation and internal disciplinary enquiries. Aspirational reasons on the other hand represent the ideals of the profession.

Professional Qualities Required in Counselling Practice

Ethics as a branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles which are the essence of counselling practice are tied together as a bundle. The following counselling professional qualities are identified by Adeoye (2004):

A counsellor should be patient enough to listen to his client and should not be in a hurry or become aggressive but be tolerant and respecting the dignity and autonomy of the client. A professional counsellor is expected to be friendly and warmly receive in good tune to individual's feelings and difficulties in counselling service delivery to his clients. He should be just, genuine and truthful by exhibiting sense of feeling and control his emotions in all situations. He should try as much as possible to communicate effectively in polite manner with his client. A professional counsellor is expected to be morally upright and a role model by being knowledgeable and intelligent in the discipline. He should be flexible on clients' views and suggestions and be very sensitive to all situations he found himself.

Also, Obikeze and Umezulike (2013), identify some varying functional responsibilities of a professional counsellor with regard to his ethical requirements as follows:

He should give out Counselling service at school settings, vocational and personal or social issues through planning and organizing guidance programmes like appropriate placement of students according to their abilities and attitudes by safeguarding and handling of vital information for proper choices and decisions by exhibiting professional competence of handling issues. A professional counsellor should assume to be an enlightened agent for educational progress.

Ethical System of Guidance Services

Egbochuku (2008) caught a glimpse of the ethical system of guidance counselling which she explained as the guidelines for behaving ethically by the guidance counsellors in order not to violate the ethical principles of their profession. The

author further maintained that the ethical system in the counselling profession involves four items to put in mind as follows:

1) **Beneficence:** This is used to refer to the ethical guideline of doing things well to prevent harm where professional counsellors are expected to show kindness and concern to their clients.

2) **Non-Maleficence:** Professional counsellors are expected to exhibit unconditional positive regards to their clients.

3) **Justice:** Professional counsellors are expected to be fair in their relationship with their clients by treating them equally in line with the laid down rules and principles.

4) **Respect for Autonomy:** The professional counsellors are expected to act ethically by having respect for their clients' autonomy such as freedom of expression, choice and self-determination.

General Ethical Standard

Usman, Abdu and Abdu (2008) pointed out some of the general professional ethics as follows:

1. Members are expected to exert any influence they can do to foster the growth and development of the profession so as to continue their professional growth throughout their career.

2. Members have the responsibility to the institution within which they serve.

3. Counsellors are expected to live up to expectation in terms of ethical, moral and professional standards.

4. Counsellors should be active in paying dues promptly.

5. They must be law abiding by being loyal to the constituted authorities and their profession.

6. Counsellors shall offer professional services through the context of professional relationship.

Ethical challenges in Counselling Practice

Counsellors have complex responsibility towards their client, i.e. they must respect client and keep their communications confidential when possible. They can break the confidentiality only when a situation involves legal authorities or if the client seems to be a threat to self or others. This is part of the challenges to the duty of counsellors. Without code of ethics, there will be no sufficient provision of scope and information to either clarify the dimensions of the problem or formulate an acceptable action to address an ethical dilemma. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2010) says that all clients are entitled to good standards of practice and care from their practitioners in counselling psychotherapy. Good standards of practice and care require professional competence; good relationship with clients and colleagues; and commitment to being ethically mindful

through observance of professional ethics. In the absence of counselling code of ethics, the practicing professionals would not have the yardstick to evaluate their work. Without code of ethics, the limits of the inter-relationship between the counsellor and the client (opposite sex) cannot be ascertained; hence, the practice should not be in a vacuum.

Codes of ethics are never legal issues because legal aspects of professional practice are laws enacted by government either at Federal, State or Local government level concerning the practice of that profession at whatever level the law specifies. So issues of ethics are handled by the professional members while the legal issues are handled by government. Code of ethics is said not to contain all that one needs to know and that codes and their interpretations change due to changing society, technology, rules and public policy (Kolo, 2015).

Suggestions

Some ethical issues to take into cognizance in Counselling practices are presented as follows:

- 1 – Practicing Counsellors should try to promote public confidence and integrity.
- 2 – Practicing counsellors should adopt an attractive, amiable and acceptable personality that will enable clients confide in them.
- 3 – Counsellors should try to avoid personal consideration or favoritism.
- 4 – Counsellors should be dedicated at all times.

Conclusion

Code of conduct relating to ethics was discussed with the objective to determine rightness or wrongness of counselling practice in the society where the ideals of Freedom, Equality and Justice to all prevail. Ethics requires counsellor to control psychological discomfort and give hope for better life adjustment to client in every situation. The ethics are the key elements needed to be taken into consideration to clear confusion in a situation of dilemma in counselling practices. The divine saying that “he who lost guidance lost everything in life” is very apt in this perspective.

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