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Counsellors' Personality Attributes: Predictors of Effective Counselling Practice among Secondary School Counsellors in Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract:

Counsellors, as helping professionals, are expected to possess some personality qualities. However, it is not very certain if relationship exists between Counsellors' personality qualities and effective counselling practice. Hence, this correlational study which aimed at determining how Counsellors' personality attributes predicts effective counselling practice among secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria. With researchers' designed questionnaire, which was face validated by three test experts, data were collected from 200 (100 male and 100 female, randomly selected practicing Counsellors in Lagos State. Result of Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient analysis of five null hypotheses postulated showed significant positive relationship exist between Counsellors' personality attributes and effective counselling practice. t -test analysis showed no significant difference exists between male and female Counsellors effectiveness in counselling practice. Based on these, some counselling implications were highlighted and recommendations made.

Keywords: *Counsellors; personality attributes; effective counselling practice correlates*

1. Introduction

Nigerian secondary school students are challenged daily by issues of educational, vocational and personal social matters that call for attention of Guidance Counsellors, the helping professionals in the school system. The relevance of Guidance Counsellors in helping adults improve their human endeavours in general and students' academic performance and social adjustments in particular has attracted the attention of educationists and policy makers in Federal Republic of Nigeria. The acknowledgement of this formed the rationale behind the policy statement contained in Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004:33) which states that "In view of the apparent ignorance of many young people about career prospects and in view of personality maladjustment among school children, career officers and counsellors shall be appointed in post primary institutions ..." This statement necessitated the need for the posting of Guidance Counsellors to schools which in turn reflects government's concern in ensuring that Nigerian students are fundamentally provided with guidance and counselling services in schools. Such services provided for students would help government actualize her educational objectives of providing qualitative education and producing self-reliant citizenry (FRN, 2014).

Guidance counsellors are helping professionals trained in guidance and counselling services. These professionals are equipped with skills needed in helping people to have better understanding of self and situations, clarify values, make informed decisions and be able to take complete responsibility of the outcomes of decisions taken, (Okeke, 2003). According to Nwachukwu (2007:25) a school counsellor is "a helping professional, a specialized programme developer, a professional reinforcer of achievements, an educational organizer, an activator of positive behaviours, a psychological clinician a consultant, a student advocate, a facilitator and an encourager". By this definition, the varied roles of Guidance Counsellors to clients are reflected. Sofenwa (1977) opines that an effective Counsellor should be an accessible, committed, patient and attentive listener. Some other personality dispositions of Counsellors include honesty, friendliness, cheerfulness, caring, objectivity, self-control, and co-operation (Ifelunni, 1997; Ivey & Ivey, 2007). Generally, these authors indicate that the extent to which a counsellor is effective in counselling relationship depends much on the professional skills possessed and the personality attributes that reflect their integrity, candour and emotional stability. This implicitly means that Counsellors' attributes should not be compromised if counselling relationships must be effective. However, a question that is yet to be answered is: How effective are Nigerian Counsellors in counselling practice? For the purpose of this study, Counsellors effectiveness in counselling practice will be assessed based on attributes of Empathic understanding, Unconditional positive regard, Genuineness and Confidentiality.

Counselling has been variously defined by authors. Burks and Steffre (1979) opined that counselling is a person to person or one-on-one relationship between a professional, the Counsellor and a non-professional, the Client in which the Counsellor assists the Client to understand him or her, and the world as well as develop the ability to achieve goals through meaningful resolutions of problems of emotional and interpersonal types. Shertzer and Stone (1980:19) defined counselling as "an intervention process that facilitates meaningful understanding of self and environment and results in the establishment and/or clarification of goals and

values for future behaviour". According to Okeke (2003:4) Counselling is a "helping relationship involving the Counsellor and the Client in which the Counsellor uses his professional knowledge and skills to assist the Client attain proper development, and maturity, improved functioning and improved ability to cope with life's problems".

From the foregoing definitions, counselling is contextually defined as a helping relationship between a professional School Counsellor and Counsellees (students) whereby the Counsellor utilizes professional skills and personal attributes to help Counsellees solve their educational, vocational and personal social matters and be well adjusted individuals in the society. In line with this definition, effective counselling is operationally defined by the researchers as that counselling which brings about desirable achievements in the educational, vocational and personal-social lives of counsellees in school and non-school settings so as to be able to contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of their nations in general and Nigeria in particular. Implicitly, effective counselling practice involves Counsellors' ability in utilizing appropriately both professional counselling skills and personal attributes in bringing about desired achievements and positive behavioural changes in counsellees which otherwise would have posed as hindrances to the growth and development of the counsellees in particular and their nations in general. In line with that Owuamanam (1990) maintained that counsellor effectiveness is the extent to which the counsellor meets the needs of the client and assists him in solving his problems. Again, toeing the same line, Boy and Pine (1978) defined effective counselling as the degree to which the client is sensitive to the existence of a behavioural problem, the counselling is voluntary for the client and the counsellor meets the needs of the client.

The effectiveness of Counsellors in counselling practice may be influenced by both Counsellors' personality attributes and some school environmental factors. As helping professionals, their enterprise depends much on total understanding of the complex psychological nature of clients' personality and dynamisms in behaviours (both adaptive and maladaptive), So as to help them achieve improvement in acquiring adaptive behaviours and decreasing the maladaptive ones. To achieve this, Counsellors are expected to possess some fundamental personality attributes such as empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, genuineness and confidentiality in counselling practice (Rogers, 1961).

Empathic understanding refers to the ability of Counsellor to wholistically understand the frame of mind of the client emotionally, cognitively and psychologically and be able to play back the understanding of these to the client in ways that would give the client hope to overcome the situational crisis he/she is confronted with. Omoegun (2001) maintains that empathic understanding involves Counsellors ability to experience another person's feelings of emotional outburst bearing in mind that the client has the problem and not the counsellor. In essence, empathic understanding involves ability of counsellor to see issues from client's point of reference without losing self in the counselling process (Rogers, 1961, Carkhuff, 2000; Egan, 2002).

Unconditional positive regard is another attribute that contributes to a Counsellor's effectiveness in counselling practice. This attribute requires that a client be seen as a human being who is worth giving deep, unrestricted warmth and concern. It reveals the total unconditional and acceptance with which the Counsellor welcomes a client (Omoegun, 2001; Olusakin and Ubangha, 2004; Nwachukwu, 2009).

Genuineness is yet another personality attribute expected in an effective Counselling practice. This attribute according to Ivey and Ivey (2007) reflects honesty and sincerity of purpose with which the Counsellor accurately drives the helping services aimed at helping the clients achieve their goal seeking objectives without being deceived. In essence genuineness in Counselling practice reflects synchronicity between what Counsellor says and what his or her behaviours are in real life situation.

Finally, Counsellors confidentiality attribute is the last personality attribute of interest in this study. This attribute as it were is that, which makes the counsellor be in dear counselling relationship with the client. What that means is that if the counsellor must effectively lead the client to achieve learning in a counselling relationship and come out of his/her temporal crisis situation, the client must be ready to open up and reveal self completely to the counsellor who must apply all the personality attributes and above all demonstrate absolute confidentiality in terms of the privileged information he/she (the counsellor) shares with the client. Confidentiality in the context of this study is the power of the counsellor to keep the privileged information of the client revealed to him/her for the purpose of the counselling relationship top secret. The counsellor reserve the moral obligation not to let out information about their clients obtained in the course of counselling relationship. This is very vital in the sense that it encourages the clients to have faith in the counselling relationship. Confidentiality is the counsellors' definite effort to reassure clients of the privacy of the counselling interview sessions and of personal information disclosed except when life is in danger (Nwachukwu, 2009). When this assurance is made the author maintained, the client becomes motivated to volunteer essential facts, and enters into a free dialogue with the counsellor in the counselling process.

2. Literature Review

It is important to note that a lot of empirical studies have been carried out in the effort of researchers to investigate factors that correlate with counsellor effectiveness in counselling practices. Among the related empirical studies examined include the counsellor demographic variables of age (Helms and Rode, 1982; Hassan, 1989); sex, (Tipton, 1984); marital status (Simons and Helms, 1976); religious background (Long, 1978; Wyatt and Johnson, 1990), educational qualifications (Heppner and Heesacker, 1983) and work experience (Spiegel, 1976; Auerbach and Johnson, 1977). Literature also revealed that some other studies have established counsellor personality characteristics as correlates of counsellors' effectiveness in counselling practices. These include warmth (Carkhuff and Berenson, 1967), caring and sincerity (Rogers, 1957) concreteness (Traux and Carkhuff, 1964) work attitudes of counsellors (Akinpelumi, 1996 and Popoola, 2002). All these to various degrees according to the findings of the investigators predict counsellors' effectiveness in their counselling practices.

3. Statement of the Problem

Guidance counsellors as human oriented professionals are expected to proffer individuals with guidance and counselling services necessary for helping clients solve their varied educational, vocational and personal-social problems and concerns, grow up well and be well adjusted individuals who are capable of productive living in their societies and nations at large. The relevance of counsellors in educational enterprise cannot be over-emphasized. In fact, it is their relevance in helping students make informed career choices and solve their personality and maladjustment problems that informed the rationale for Nigerian government's declaration in her National Policy on Education that Career Officers and Counsellors be posted to post primary institutions. For over three decades Nigerian Guidance Counsellors have been practicing in post primary schools with some challenges. Literature over these years seem to show that researchers focused more on identifying external factors that tend to hinder Counsellors' effectiveness in Counselling practice than on their personality attributes. Some external factors identified include government's inability to tenaciously enforce her policy statement, poor funding, paucity of trained Counsellors in schools, poor and inadequate infrastructures, and over load of work on the few available Counsellors. The researchers are therefore poised to ask: Do Counsellors' personality attributes influence and predict their effectiveness in Counselling practice? This concern informed the rationale for carrying out this study in Lagos State.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between Counsellors' personality attributes and effective counselling practice among secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria. Specifically the study determined if:

- Relationship exists between Counsellors' personality attribute of empathic understanding and effective counselling practice.
- Relationship exists between Counsellors' personality attribute of unconditional positive regard and effective counselling practice.
- Relationship exists between Counsellors' personality attribute of genuineness and effective counselling practice.
- Relationship exists between Counsellors' personality attribute of confidentiality and effective counselling practice.
- Gender difference exists between Counsellors' effectiveness in counselling practice.

5. Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses tested at 0.05 probability level guided the study.

- There is no significant relationship between Counsellors' personality attribute of empathic understanding and effective in counselling practice.
- There is no significant relationship between Counsellors' personality attribute of unconditional positive regard and effectiveness in counselling practice.
- There is no significant relationship between Counsellors' personality attribute of genuineness and effectiveness in counselling practice.
- There is no relationship between Counsellors' personality attribute of confidentiality attribute and effectiveness in counselling practice.
- There is no significant difference between the mean score ratings of male and female Counsellors of effective in counselling practice.

6. Methodology

6.1. Design of the Study

A correlational Survey research design was adopted in this study. This was with the intent to determine the relationship between Counsellors' attributes (of empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, genuineness and confidentiality) and effectiveness in counselling practice among Secondary Schools Counsellors in Lagos State.

6.2. Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Lagos State. Lagos State is located in the South – West geo- political zone of Nigeria. The state is made up of three senatorial zones and twenty local government areas and was the first capital city of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Lagos State is a Cosmopolitan State, as people from various parts of Nigeria settle and lives there. Many non-Nigerians are also found living in Lagos State. The metropolitan city of Lagos, where this study was carried out was estimated at 10.5 million inhabitants (the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999)

Lagos is the commercial nerve Centre of Nigeria. As once the capital and seat of federal government of Nigeria, Lagos still remains the headquarters of most of the major banks, commerce and industries that add value to the economy of the country in general and the people who live in Lagos particularly.

It was very important to carry out this study in Lagos to estimate the extent to which counsellors are not carried away by the hustle and bustle live in Lagos, sacrificing their very vital service to the appropriate development of the adolescent students in Lagos State.

6.3. Population of the Study

This comprised all the trained guidance Counsellors that are practicing guidance and Counselling in secondary schools in Lagos State. This totals to about 350. (Source: Planning Unit Lagos State Education Board, 2013/2014).

6.4. Sample and Sampling Techniques

The sample for the study comprised 200 (100 male and 100 female) practicing Guidance Counsellors. These were purposively sampled from among those practicing Counsellors who are registered members of Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON), Lagos branch. The purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the sample in order to ensure that it was only functional Counsellors that were selected.

6.5. Instrument for Data Collection

A 27-item Researchers' designed questionnaire was used for the study. The instrument was titled "Attributional Correlates of Counselling Effectiveness Questionnaire (ACCEQ). This instrument has sections A and B. Section A elicited information on the demographic data of respondents. Section B contained items which elicited information on the degree of exhibition of personality attributes of Counsellors with regard to empathic, understanding, Unconditional positive regard, Genuineness, and Confidentiality in counselling practice. These items were put in four clusters placed on a five points rating scale of Always, Often, Occasional, Rarely and Never and weighted, 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 accordingly.

6.6. Validation and Reliability of the Instrument

The ACCEQ was face validated by three test experts in University of Lagos. The reliability estimate procedure was by Test retest approach. This was done within an interval of two weeks. The internal consistency of the items was determined using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Statistics which analysis gave a high coefficient value of 0.83. Thus, indicating that the instrument has internal stability and highly reliable to be used for the study.

7. Data Collection and Data Analysis of the Study

The Researchers assisted by two Research Assistants personally administered the questionnaire to the purposively sampled respondents and collected same on the spot after completion. Data analysis involved frequency counts, percentage, Mean, Standard Deviation and Pearson Produced Moment Correlation Coefficient and Independent t-test statistical analysis. The null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 probability level.

8. Results

This section presents the results of data analysis on demography of respondents, and null hypotheses findings of the study.

Variable	Frequency Client	Percentage
Sex		
Male	100	50
Female	100	50
Total	200	100
Years of Experience		
5 - 10 years	119	59.5
11 - 20 years	69	34.5
Above 20 years	12	6.0
Total	200	100
Educational Qualification		
B.ED	120	60.0
M.ED.	70	35.0
Ph.D	10	5.0
Total	200	100

Table 1: Demographic Analysis of Respondents of Study

Table 1 demographic analysis shows there are 50% male and 50% female Counsellor participated in the study. This is a reflection of gender equity in sampling of the Counsellors. Years of experience of respondents shows 59.5% (119) respondents have between five to 10 years practicing experience, 34% (69) have between 10 to 20 years experience while 6% (12) have above 20 years working experience. Their educational qualifications reveal 60% (120) of the Counsellors have first degree followed by 35% (70) of those with Master's Degree. The least posed qualification of the respondents is Doctorate degree which records 5% (10) of the sample.

Table 2, shows Pearson Product moment correlation analysis result of null hypotheses one, two, three and four ($H_{01} - H_{04}$) on the Relationship between Counsellors' personality attributes and effectiveness in counselling practice. This is stated as: There is no significant relationship between Counsellors' personality attributes in terms of (Empathic understanding, Unconditional positive regard, Genuineness and Confidentiality and effectiveness in Counselling practice.

Variable	\bar{X}	SD	r-cal	r-critical	Decision
Cluster 1					
Empathic Understanding	4.38	0.23			
Counselling			*0.63	0.16	Ho ₁ S
Counselling practice (Ho ₁)	3.56	0.18			
Cluster 2	3.62	0.76			
Unconditional					
Positive Regard			*0.51	0.16	Ho ₂ S
Effective Counselling Practice (Ho ₂)	3.56	0.18			
Cluster 3	4.62	0.32			
Genuiness					
			*0.41	0.16	Ho ₃ S
Effective Counselling Practice (Ho ₃)	3.56	0.18			
Cluster 4	3.29	0.39			
Confidentiality					
			*0.29	0.16	Ho ₄ S
Effective Counselling Practice (Ho ₄)	3.56	0.18			

Table 2: Person Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Analysis of Counsellors' Attributes and Effectiveness in Counselling Practice
Probability Level = 0.05, n = 200; df = 198, S= Significant

Results of data analysis presented in Table 2 show that Counsellors' personality attributes of empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, genuiness and confidentiality are significantly and positively correlated with effectiveness in counselling practice. This is because the calculated r-values =0.63, 0.51, 0.41 and 0.29 for attributes of empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, genuiness and confidentiality respectively are higher than the Critical r-value of 0.16. Consequently, the null hypotheses one to four are rejected. These results imply that these Counsellor attributes predict effectiveness in counselling practice. The analysis further reveal that Counsellors personality attributes of genuiness and confidentiality though are significant, they have low positive relationship with the effectiveness in counselling practice. This implies that these attributes are exhibited by Counsellors to a low degree in counselling practice.

Ho₅ States: There is no significant difference between the mean score ratings of male and female Counsellors' on effectiveness in counselling practice. Analysis of data is presented in

Variable	N	\bar{X}	SD	df	t-cal	t-critical	Decision
Effective Counselling (Ho ₅)							
Male	100	13.39	3.27				
				198	1.59	1.96	NS
Female	100	12.46	2.87				

Table 3: t-test of Gender difference Analysis of Effective Counselling Practice
Probability = 0.05; NS = Not significant

Data analysis result shows in Table 3 reveals a calculated t-value 1.59 which is less than the Critical t-value of 1.96 at 1.98 degree of freedom and 0.05 probability level. This finding is not significant. Consequently the null hypothesis is not rejected.

8.1. Discussion of Results

This study sought to determine the relationship between Counsellors' personality attributes of Empathy, Unconditional positive regard, Genuiness and Confidentiality of Counsellors as predictors of effective counselling practice. The demographic analysis of respondents (Lagos State Counsellors) shown in Table I reveals that the Counsellors are experienced professionals as approximately 60% of the respondents have five to ten years working experience. Academically the analysis also show that they are educational equipped as about 60% of them have first degrees while 40% have higher degrees in Guidance and Counselling or Counselling psychology. By these characteristics, it is assumed that they are well disposed to provide effective counselling practice capable of helping secondary school students under their care to become better adjusted and self-reliant individuals who would be able to solve their problems and contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of their societies and Nigeria nation as a whole (Ifelunni, 1997), Nwachukwu 2007).

Generally, this study reveals that Lagos State Counsellors' personality attributes of empathy, Unconditional positive regard, genuiness and Confidentiality are positively and significantly correlated with effectiveness in counselling practice. In other words, these attributes are predictors of effective counselling practice. The higher these attributes are exhibited by Counsellors the higher are their effectiveness in counselling practice. This finding is interesting as it reveals that the Counsellors possess and exhibit this personality in tandem with the expected ethical professional behavior of Counsellors in (Rogers, 1961; Ifelunni, 1997; Omoegun, 2001; Ivey and Ivey, 2007).

However, it is worth noting that although the Counsellors personality attributes of Empathy, Unconditional positive regard, Genuineness and Confidentiality are positive and significantly corrected with effective counselling practice the first two attributes reveal moderate correlation while the last two show low correction with effective counselling practice. These findings corroborates with Omogun (2001) which indicates that Nigeria Counsellors though are exposed to esoteric knowledge are black in exhibiting the necessary personality qualities in counselling practice. This, therefore calls for improvement on exhibition of these appropriate personality attributes. It is hoped that when improved Counselees would be more willing to avail themselves. For counselling and be helped to develop positive self-concept and confidence in their abilities to overcome the ever existing situational challenges of life.

The researcher feel it may not be an overstatement to say that the observed low positive significant relationship of Lagos State Counsellors' personality attributes of genuiness and confidentiality with effective counselling practice would be as a factor of environmental influence. The complex nature of Lagos state could have influenced the Counsellors to exhibit unethical behaviours just to conform with societal demands in order to win their recognition and acceptance.

Another possible factor that could be contributory to the low correlation between Counsellors' attributes of genuineness and confidentiality with effective counselling practice is poor provision of physical facilities. When Counsellors' offices are not properly secured unauthorized persons can easily have access to clients' records; Thus, prying into the confidentiality of their information. Such a situation can create in clients loss of trust and confidence on Counsellors' and eventual withdrawal attitude to counselling relationships. No wonder Ubangha (2004) noted that a Counsellors success in counselling practice depends much on his or her integrity and candour and personality qualities exhibited in counselling relationship.

Finally, this study also reveals that no significant difference exists between male and female counselors with regards to effectiveness in counselling practice (Reference Table 3). This finding is not surprising as it tends to affirm the fact that both gender are exposed to same professional training procedures and practice under similar environmental conditions.

9. Counselling Implications

The findings of this study reveal far reaching implications. For instance, the study reveals that empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, genuineness and confidentiality attributes of the Counsellors significantly and positively correlated with effectiveness in counselling practice. This invariably implies that these attributes are predictors of effective counselling practice. Thus, the more these attributes are exhibited by Counsellors in counselling practice, the higher the probability of counselees needs to be met in counseling practice and were versa. Furthermore, the finding of this study reveals that the Counsellors' confidentiality and genuineness attributes have low but significant positive correlation with Counsellors' effectiveness in counselling practice. The implication of this is that Counsellors in Lagos state might start experiencing low turn out of counselees if Counsellors they do not improve on these attributes.

Again, the finding in Table 3 reveals that there is no significant difference exists between effectiveness in counselling practice of male and female Counsellors in Lagos State. However, higher mean score of 13.39 for the male Counsellors as against the mean score of 12.46 for the females Counsellors could be as a result of environment factors rather than Counsellors' personality attributes. This therefore reveals the need that there exists no for providing conducive counselling environment.

10. Recommendations

In view of the findings and counselling Implications of this study the following recommendations are made:

- Counsellors' training should involve enough simulation exercises needed to inculcate in them the necessary personality attributes that would enhance their effectiveness in counselling practice.
- Practicing Counsellors should always endeavour to exhibit warm acceptance, unconditional positive regard confidentiality and empathy to students so that they will willingly make themselves available for counselling.
- Counsellors should build up students' confidence in their ability to help them become better individuals by being role models that are worthy of emulation. When students are assured confidentially of their information they will become more open in counselling relationships.
- Government should see that Counsellors offices are safe guarded and equipped with modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities to ensure secure counselling interviews and proper storing of clients' information and confidentiality.

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