

THE FUTURE IS NOW: DEVELOPING COUNSELLOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN NIGERIA

Emmanuel U. Oramah, PhD
School of The Faith and Leadership
Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

Introduction

With almost six decades of existence, counselling in Nigeria could still be said to be relatively young in comparison to the western world. This fact notwithstanding, however, counselling practice in Nigeria has remained a viable and visible entity within the Nigerian educational service delivery. To this effect, quite a number of counselling personnel have been trained by various universities in Nigeria and are currently contributing immensely to the Nigerian educational system and the mental wellbeing of the general public at large. Apparently, a greater percentage of the trained counsellors have first degrees or masters and are functioning within the school setting as school counsellors. Quite a number have also been trained at the doctoral level. Added to these facts, counsellors in Nigeria have continued to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and solutions to issues and problems through teaching and research endeavours. As such, the low public awareness of the existence of counselling and its benefits could have improved since the advent of the counselling services nearly six decades ago. Invariably, the increasing public awareness of counselling services in the country does seem to raise an added responsibility for counsellors in Nigeria to begin contemplating the development and entrenchment of counsellor professional identity as a worthwhile venture. Quite evidently, counsellor professional identity has become a leading concern in the counselling profession considering the flurry of research activities that have emerged in recent times (Hierbert, Simpson, Uhlemann, 1992; Gibson, Dollarhide & Moss, 2010; Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Gale & Austin, 2003).

Concept of Development

Using the term “development” here pushes us beyond the mere act of learning something once. Development is a fluid and complex human phenomenon. But in this context, development would point to a continuous improvement of understanding which is aided by active learning. Thus, McLeod and McLeod (2014, p.45) note that “the idea of development implies an irreversible shift from one level of understanding and functioning, to another level”. The ethical dimension of this expected irreversible shift from

one level of understanding and functioning to another would mean right and adequate exposition to all mediums that aid an individual's understanding and functioning. These mediums could be didactic or experiential in nature. In addition, an ethical development is composed of two vital constituents as professional development and personal development. All learning has both professional and personal dimensions that are usually intertwined and overlapping in different contexts (McLeod & McLeod, 2014). The professional development pertains to the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Thomas & George, 2016;) and it involves learning activities that are primarily aimed at promoting specific job-relevant skills and knowledge (McLeod & McLeod, 2014). The personal development would involve a self-motivated effort that increases self-awareness and equally enhances the emotional and cognitive functions of the individual. From these explanations, it would appear that the professional development component impacts directly on the *theoretical knowledge acquisition* as different from the personal development component that impacts directly on the *individual's personal qualities*.

Concept of Counsellor Professional Identity

At the centre of counsellor professional identity is the realization and acceptance of the fact that behaviours and attitudes actually reflect the counsellor's identity. In addition, values (that is what is important to the individual) are imbedded in the identity the individual projects to the world. Along this line, Mrdjenovich and Moore (2004) view professional identity as someone having a sense of connection to the values and emphasis of a profession as a whole. Similarly, professional identity of the counsellor will involve internalizing the collective attributes, ideals, and objectives as mapped out by the professional group (Ibarra, 1999). Believed to include also learning about specific therapeutic skills and interventions, McLeod and McLeod (2014, P.66) define counsellor professional identity as "learning activities that are primarily aimed at promoting specific job-relevant skills and knowledge". But some form of integration is needed towards achieving professional identity. Thus, Nugent and Jones (2009) believe that professional identity results from adequate integration of professional training with personal attributes within the context of a professional community.

Professional identity development occurs at two levels that include the *intrapersonal* and the *interpersonal* (Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss, 2010; Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003) as they both point to the processes of *autonomy* and *dependence* while acquiring the necessary professional skills that impact positively on the development of professional identity. Within the interpersonal phase, the counsellor-trainee immersion in conceptual learning,

experiential, and external evaluation come largely from the lecturers' expertise (Gibson, et al, 2010). In other words, the student's interaction with the faculty members provides the foundation for professional identity formation. Meanwhile, the professional identity development will likely solidify quickly when the trainees become less dependent on the external evaluation or validation by counsellor educators or supervisors (Brott & Myers, 1999). This is necessary because professional identity development comes from knowing one's roles. In effect, if counsellors do not know their roles and have not started performing those roles efficiently, then the acquisition of professional identity may remain elusive.

The Problem

Despite the fact that counselling practice in Nigeria has enjoyed almost six decades of existence, the issue of professional identity has not fully come to the front burner as a very vital component of ethical practice and service delivery. Understandably, counselling in Nigeria is still pursuing the objective of achieving a legislative approval of the counselling profession as a vital step toward professionalization. In view of this reality, it may be understood why issues like professional identity may not have received attention from practitioners and researchers. But that is precisely why professional identity development should be pursued as well because professionalization through legislative approval cannot be divorced from professional identity development. In fact, professional identity development should be a constituent element of professionalization of counselling in Nigeria. In addition, the pursuit of legislative approval of counselling at the upper house of the National Assembly has not precluded the fact that identity crisis does seem to exist among counsellors and school counsellors in particular. For example, there is a continued uncertainty regarding the role of school counsellors within the school environment. It is known that school counsellors in Nigeria and even elsewhere have been asked to perform other functions that are at variance with their training as substitute teachers, bursars, clerks or administrators which invariably hinder their role as school counsellors (Attahiru, 2005). Such scenario does not help school counsellors to adequately define themselves and consequently develop a professional identity.

Away from the school environment, there are some issues that seem to challenge counsellors' sense of professional identity development and could also be perpetuating professional identity struggles. These issues include but are not limited to the following:

- a) **Housing a counselling programme with other disciplines under one roof or in the same department** – It is evident that in some

universities in the country, the counselling programme is housed in the “Department of Educational Foundations” or the same counselling programme is twined with a different or allied programme to form a department. In addition to the competition that may ensue between counselling and other programmes or disciplines in such atmosphere, it does seem that it is less likely to lead to and equally facilitate the development of professional identity among counselling faculty members. There is a possibility that a full department of counselling only as an autonomous separate entity of its own within the Faculty of Education could lead to a more sense of satisfaction, pride, and development of a professional identity.

- b) Having counsellors-in-training projects, theses or dissertations supervised by non counsellors-** In some instances faculty or departmental members that represent a variety of other disciplines such as Educational Psychology, Clinical Psychology, and Measurement and Evaluation have taken on the role of supervisors to counselling students. To be properly mentored and supervised by experts within the field the students have chosen is not being adhered to (Bobby & Urofsky, 2011). To be supervised by one of one’s own kind could increase a student’s liking or preference for the profession.

It does seem and it could be argued from all intent and purposes that these factors above could actually help in an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge, research, inter-professional collaboration, and cross fertilization of ideas. However, they could still constitute obstacles towards an early and subsequent development of counsellor professional identity if the same identity had not been fully developed ab initio. They could be subtly and insidiously contributing to the blurring of professional identity among counsellors and counsellors-in-training in particular.

Counselling is an emerging profession in Nigeria. Thus, the objectives here include among other things the need to arouse among counsellors in Nigeria the awareness regarding professional identity as a critical component of ethical practice and service delivery; to arouse among counsellors in Nigeria a critical reflection on how they view themselves. This is against the backdrop that how one perceives himself/herself tends to influence the individual’s behaviour; to advocate for renewed interest in the content of counsellor education programmes/professional training programmes in the country as the foundational base of professional identity formation.

Therefore, based on the apparent lack of literature locally that has specifically explored the issue of professional identity development, there are

reasons that make it a necessity now. Firstly, the growing counselling awareness among the populace could push the same public as consumers of counselling services to seek to know what actually differentiates counselling from other allied mental health providers. In other words, what makes counsellors and counselling unique entity of its own which ensures its relevance to the society? This is against the background that if counsellors actually find out and also know who they are, they are bound to know their limits and relationships with other allied professions in the society (Neukrug, 2007). A counsellor who is able to say “this is who I am” will most likely know his/her limits or boundaries while fully discharging the required responsibilities. Secondly, a well established professional identity will rub off positively on the counsellor trainees who are at various stages of training in the country. It would give the students sense of belonging and extra liking for the counselling profession. They are more likely to feel that they are being born or being initiated into a group/profession whose identity is not in doubt. It could make students to be more interested in counselling as an enduring profession that brings satisfaction and fulfilment in the long run. Thirdly, pondering on the counsellor professional identity development in Nigeria will hopefully begin the process of filling the gap on professional literature on this vital area locally. While there is a flurry of research endeavours on this all important dimension of the counselling profession, there is currently no article on the counsellor professional identity locally. Therefore, if the professional identity of counsellors in Nigeria could be said to be currently undifferentiated and muddled, it should not be allowed to get muddier. To this effect, it is not out of order to begin now to ask how the development of professional identity among counsellors in Nigeria could be institutionalized, strengthened, and equally enhanced.

Pathways for counsellors’ professional identity development

Professional identity development is thought to be a process which involves adopting the required behaviours and perspectives of one’s self within a professional context (McElhinney, 2008). Therefore, toward helping counsellors adopt the required behaviours and perspectives and also kick-starting the desired professional identity development among counsellors in Nigeria, some issues are thought pertinent for the process.

Recruitment of trainees

On the surface level, it does appear that a mere recruitment of counselling trainees may not have any relevance or bearing to the development of counsellor professional identity. But realities on ground do

seem to suggest the need to pay attention to the process of recruiting counselling trainees in Nigeria. The current scenario is that some universities allocate students to courses they never dreamt of studying ab initio in their United Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME). It is a policy that could distort a student's personal liking and attachment to a course. On this note, there is a possibility that if the personality of the trainee does not really support the course of study, later personal and professional development could be hampered. Meanwhile, both dimensions are needed toward the development of professional identity. Therefore, it might be necessary to consider a process that provides an opportunity for selecting counselling trainees who are disposed to the helping profession as evidenced from their personalities because it could easily facilitate the formation and development of professional identity in the long run. In other words, personal and social traits could be vital in an individual's choice of, progress, and satisfaction in the helping profession as counselling.

Well known Holland's typology provides us with six model personal orientations and matching career environments which indicate that individuals are possibly attracted to a given career on the basis of their personalities. Following Holland's argument, the Realistic personality would like to work with tools or machines, avoids social activities like teaching, healing, and informing others, sees self as practical, mechanical, and realistic. Against Holland's tested idea, the current practice in Nigerian universities that arbitrary allocates individuals to different courses will likely push individuals with the above mentioned attributes of the Realistic Personality into a counselling course because he or she did not meet the cut-off marks for mechanical engineering. Inversely, the individual with Holland's Social Personality that values human interaction, helping people and solving social problems, sees self as helpful, friendly, and trustworthy could be pushed to Physics Education course because he or she did not meet the cut-off requirement for psychology or counselling psychology. This scenario could hamper rather than support the possibility of using a recruitment process to get right counsellor-trainees as a veritable foundation for subsequent building up professional identity for counsellors.

Counsellor Education

Professional identity of counsellors cannot be divorced from the counsellor education that is in place (Hansen, 2003). Invariably, a thorough professional identity development should actually begin with counsellor-in-training programmes (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003). The implication is that the different counselling programmes in the universities in the country need to

be tailored toward answering the question “what sort of professional identity does counselling in Nigeria wish to carve out for itself? Answering this question could become an uphill task unless it is accepted that the counsellor education that is in place is more likely to be a strong predictor of initial development of professional identity among counsellors-in-training. Therefore, if counselling in Nigeria is actually thinking about how to bring out the distinction of itself vis-a-vis other helping professions, then counsellors-in-training should not only be taught skills and techniques of counselling, they should be well schooled on who they are and what they do that leads to new ways of understanding (McLeod, 2014). As a condition for achieving this objective, Suttle (2017) suggests that quite early in their training, students should be introduced to the differences between mental health disciplines. He believes it is necessary because psychology emphasizes research and pathology, counselling emphasizes prevention and development, and social work emphasizes systems and institutions. It is hoped that such exercise should help to keep students focused on understanding what counsellors do, how they define themselves, what informs their work, what it is they stand for and stand by in their daily undertakings (Gignac, 2015). This orientation will help to instil into the minds of the counsellor trainees that their education is not just a mere academic exercises but a training that focuses on professional identity development which involves adopting new behaviours and development of a new perspective of one’s self within a professional community (McElhinney, 2008).

Supervision Experience

If counsellors’ professional identity development is to be fostered, then the content of counsellors’ training and development needs to extend beyond mere academic learning to the supervisory experience for both counsellors-in-training and practitioners in the field. The supervisory experience being canvassed here is akin to the usual counselling practicum which undergraduates carry out among secondary school students but the intensity and context are very much different. Supervised experience here would mean *internship* or *placements* in addiction centres, hospitals, prisons, and governmental organizations like National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). Working in these and similar settings is more likely to provide a platform for teasing out professional identity that is consistent with one’s work (Pistole & Roberts, 2002). It could be possible because the expected supervisory experience here would involve a hierarchical

relationship between an experienced counsellors and a supervisee (post-doctoral individual) with evaluation as a key component (Campbell, 2000). It is all about helping the individual become better and more effective with regard to self-understanding and skills implementation (Watkins, 1997). Being a facilitated personal development experience, it would mean accumulating the stipulated number of hours of learning within an interpersonal one-on-one relationship that leads to awareness of oneself and adequate validation by an experienced colleague. It is accepted that professional identity development occurs within the context of external validation (Gibson, et al, 2010). It does not also exclude the fact that the self-awareness that is achieved by the supervisee could be shifting the locus of evaluating or validating one's professional identity development to the internal as well.

Mandatory Membership of a Professional Body & Licensure

Professional bodies are platforms for identifying and expressing one's professional self. A professional embodies the values that drive the profession. As such, it articulates the ethical codes and behaviours that members need to subscribe as a way of protecting and projecting their collective identity. Supporting this fact, Nugent and Jones (2009) believe that professional identity development would be aided by adequate integration of one's professional training with personal attributes within the context of a professional community. A professional body confers identity on its members who identify with the ethos, values, and mandates of the body. As such, a counsellor that understands the values that guide and shape the counselling profession cannot be elsewhere other than the professional body (Counselling Association of Nigeria, CASSON) that promotes and projects those values. This explains why being a member of a professional body or community will help to shape the emergence of professional identity because it creates not only a forum for validation of individuals personal experiences but equally provides avenues for feedbacks regarding one's responsibilities and progress. This is in accord with the idea that being a professional and professional identity development is achievable through progress in attitude regarding responsibility, ethical standards, and membership of professional association (Gibson, Colette, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Rose, 2008). All these point to the fact that a member of a professional body is an ambassador of that body. It implies that one has an identity which the body has conferred on him or her and which the body equally expects him/her to maintain and project to the world.

On a practical level, integrating a professional examination at the tail end of the undergraduate counsellor education programme as a prerequisite for

induction into membership for Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) could set the tone firmly for licensure and subsequent professional identity facilitation.

Conclusion

What seems obvious is that counsellor professional identity will be among the contextual variables that may drive the counselling profession in the 21st century Nigeria. Solving identity confusion through early establishment of counsellor professional identity will help to ground the counselling profession and its activities in Nigeria as a different and a distinct entity among other helping professions. Our discussions above have shown that it is a possible venture to embark upon if issues like recruitment of trainees, counsellor education, supervision, and membership of professional body are incorporated among other possible issues that might be considered. Therefore, if counsellors in Nigeria are seriously thinking about the future viability and relevancy of the counselling profession in modern day Nigeria with regards to the development of professional identity, then the future is now indeed.

Recommendations

If professional identity is thought to be a necessity because it creates value for the individual counsellor and value for the counselling profession as well (Parsons & Zhang, 2013), the following recommendations are provided as part of the processes for realizing the objective of facilitating the development of professional identity among counsellors in Nigeria.

- Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) should press for the establishment of full autonomous departments of counselling in universities. Such departments could be called “Department of Counsellor Education or Department of Counselling Psychology or Department of Counselling and Human Development”. If counselling departments at the universities are allowed to have their own unique identities, it will cascade to the students and their lives afterwards as products of the department.
- Counsellor education students’ projects, theses, and dissertations should be exclusively supervised by qualified counselling professionals. Counselling students deserve the opportunity of not only being mentored and supervised by experts in their chosen field, but also to be assisted to fully understand and appreciate the rich unique history of their chosen profession which qualified professional counsellors can bequeath to them.

- Other forms of recruiting counselling trainees such as examination or interviews needs to be considered to probably supplement university's arbitrary allocation of students to counsellor education programme even when such students may not be disposed to being counsellors.

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