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Client/family interface in counselling: challenges for counsellor acceptability and performance in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT   *In its three decades of formal existence in Nigeria, counselling is still an emerging profession. This paper does not attempt to evaluate the current status of counselling in Nigeria. Instead, the major thrust of the paper is to bring to light a major dimension that a number of practitioners tend to ignore in their interaction with Nigerian clients—that is, the client/family interface. This dimension is a major distinguishing factor in bringing in culture-relevant variables and how these variables impact and impinge on the counselling process, counsellor effectiveness and acceptability.*

Introduction

The stimulus for this paper is drawn from familial influences on Nigerian clients in counselling. The Nigerian client is not different from clients all over the world, but operates within contexts that are shaped and determined by variables which interact and assign meaning to behavioural patterns and practices. These variables are embedded within cultural, social and psychological framework, thereby providing a reference and identity point.

One such variable that has been identified as playing a major role in determining behaviour is the family unit (Odebunmi, 1992). The family unit is a crucial point of reference where values, beliefs and assumptions are drawn. In addition, cultural realities, aesthetic tastes, ideas and world views are also projected by the family (Weisner & Weibel, 1981). The problems are projected and perceived and the solutions proffered are also largely determined by the quality of interaction within the family unit (Ipaye, 1995). The client/family interface is seen in the light

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of familial influences on the client and vice versa, which are in an interacting and intervening relationship. An osmotic interplay is evident in the type of relationship that exists where family influences impact on the client/counsellor relationship and vice versa. The outcome of the relationship shapes the psycho-social context that the counsellor operates in, a major part being the context where levels of interaction are shaped and determined. This context can be seen in light of physical and psychological dimensions. In the past, focus on the working environment tended towards the physical dimension (Shertzer & Stone, 1980; Benjamin, 1991). This is probably due to two major reasons. Firstly, the physical environment is easy to access and assess. Secondly, it had always been assumed that counselling and counsellor education proceeded from generic framework, with all counselling theories being gainfully applicable to all individuals regardless of cultural variations. However, current research has shown strong indication of the necessity to understand cultural implications and variations as they impinge on the client and thus affect the counsellor in whatever context (Ridley *et al.*, 1994). On the international scene, the Division of Counselling Psychology of the American Psychological Association in a formal recognition of this situation organized a symposium on Multi Cultural Training for Counsellors in August 1993. Very recently, too, the Division of Counselling Psychology of the British Psychological Society had as its theme 'New Horizons for Counselling Psychology'—it addressed, among other things, the Cultural Context in Counselling.

The Nigerian client's family context

The Nigerian client's family context is basically exclusive and extensive (Obayan, 1995). It is exclusive in the sense that the family in the Nigerian context is closely knit. There is a tendency toward excluding 'outsiders' from certain forms of interaction, especially those involving trust. Imouokhome (1989) referred to this as the undisclosing nature of the Nigerian counselling client. This is very much in tune with the exclusive nature of the Nigerian family setting where socialization practices are learnt. The client thus carries this frame of reference into the counselling situation. On the other hand, the family in the Nigerian context is extensive because the family here takes its description from ancestral ties. Once an ancestral tie is established, degrees of family separations are irrelevant. For example, the Nigerian does not have cousins, 1st or 2nd, only a brother or sister. This is different from the Western conception of this type of family situation, which has been described as extended when reference is made to such family members as cousins, aunts and uncles. In actual fact the Nigerian has in reality a primary family, albeit an extensive one.

The Nigerian client's family context generates multiple influences, which have a rippling effect on various areas of the client's life experience. These influences include socialization, support, behavioural dispositions, etc.

Socialization

The Nigerian client family is the first agent of socialization. Cultural values, beliefs and approved modes of behaviour, marriage and family life prescription, child-rearing practices, communication and religious beliefs are set through socialization practices. Consequently, the client's response patterns are most often the result of these inculcated influences. These influences are evident in a number of ways. Firstly, the personhood of the Nigerian client is one in which the group and not the individual is perceived as the reality (Okon, 1983), the most important group here being the family. Consequently, the client in a counselling relationship brings along the cultural determinants and psycho-social premises of the group that is his reference and identity point.

Secondly, socialization in the family context encourages dependency and group support even though this is restricted by the exclusive nature of the family (Obayan, 1995). Thirdly, appropriate responses, verbal and non-verbal communication patterns are pre-set by familial patterns of socialization.

Support

In the area of support, family members are brought up to be their brother's or sister's keeper. The Nigerian client's family plays a significant support function in (a) psychological shock absorber, (b) economic function, and (c) decision-making.

The psychological shock absorber function portrays the caring nature of the Nigerian family and its members. Problems are shared in deep dimensions and there are ready ears and lips to hear people out and offer advice and assistance. Economic and decision-making functions are also played by the family. Consequently, the Nigerian client is never alone at any time, even if in the physical sense he is. This has obvious consequences for the client's decision-making and self-appraisal process.

Behavioural disposition

The family for the Nigerian client is the major reference point in the determination of psychological status. Self-esteem, hostility and world-view levels are largely derived from the nature and characteristics of the particular family rather than from individual successes alone. In concluding this section, therefore, it is obvious that the family provides the Nigerian client with a sense of belongingness and identity.

The client/family interface, and the counselling process

The client/family interface is an ignored dimension when analysing the working environment of the counsellor. The focus, as mentioned earlier, has usually been in terms of physical setting appropriateness and the existing internal and external factors that would enhance the counselling process. The contributions of a counsellor to the client's well-being are dependent upon the existence of an

environment consistent with his responsibilities (Pietrofesa & Vriend, 1971). In describing the Nigerian client family context it is obvious that a number of factors and forces within the client's cultural context shapes his personality and perceptual response mode. This, however, impacts on the psycho-social working environment of the Nigerian counsellor.

Firstly, the exclusive familial setting of the clients results in a situation where the counsellor is perceived as an outsider and thus looked upon with suspicion. It therefore becomes difficult for a counsellor in this setting to freely provide an atmosphere of trust, genuiness, acceptance and unconditional positive regard, which are core elements that facilitate counselling.

Pullyblank (1974), as an American counsellor working with Nigerian students, had initial problems with the establishment of mutual trust with her students in the counselling interaction. This mistrust is further enhanced by the type of family setting the client comes from. According to Pullyblank (1974), students generally come to the University from a country setting within a homogenous and stable ethnic environment. In such a setting there are clear-cut modes of communal and social interactions. Their social roles are well defined and understood. Their self-concepts are stable. One can then understand why a client from this type of background described above looks on the counsellor with suspicion. It is not psychologically healthy to ignore mistrust in counselling or expect that with time it will wear off, as this may lead to misdiagnosis of the problem brought in to the counselling relationship, identification of inappropriate outcome goals and treatment error. This mistrust and suspicion may further result in premature termination of the counselling relationship (Ridley *et al.*, 1994). The psycho-social working environment of the counsellor is thereby heavily laden with suspicion and mistrust. This is bound to affect the growth process of the counselling relationship. The counsellor will have to struggle through this barrier before all other levels in the counselling interaction can be reached. The establishment of rapport, for example, cannot be achieved in an environment in which mistrust and suspicion are inherent.

Secondly, the client in the Nigerian setting is from a familial context where he does not exist in isolation but has his family as a major continuous influence. The impact this has on the psycho-social working environment of the professional in the Nigerian setting is that the counsellor finds his counselling room crowded as the client is accompanied by an 'invisible multitude' present and yet not present, influencing and yet inaccessible. This thus beclouds his professional operations and puts him under pressure, and major decisions that need to be taken within the counselling environment end up being deferred to a later date until the approval of the invisible multitude is gained.

Thirdly, the counsellor, in carrying out his function, finds himself operating in a working environment in which roles are not clearly defined. This is because the counsellor performs a role that in the Nigerian family setting is the preserve of the family (Obayan, 1995) and yet is at the same time considered an outsider. The counsellor is not free to operate from the Classical Western counselling framework and yet is not fully equipped to operate as a member of the family, having not been socialized to meet the approved standards of that family setting. The resulting state

of flux defines the psycho-social environment in which a counsellor works—being torn between and betwixt. This thus affects his level of confidence and competence, clarity of operation as well as his smoothness of interaction, which should normally be evident in a counselling relationship.

Fourthly, the Nigerian client tends to be more other-directed and more used to authoritarian up-bringing than Western clients (Pullyblank, 1974). As a result, family expectations of the counselling becomes the basis on which the counselling relationship is rated, very much like assessment by an unknown person bringing about any intrusion on the counsellor's freedom of action.

Fifthly, the Nigerian client, generally speaking, as a result of the extensiveness of the family, rarely grows up feeling rejected (Imouokhome, 1987), thus resulting in a generally balanced psychological framework which he brings into the counselling relationship. The counsellor is thus provided with a springboard in defining the direction of counselling. There might then be no need to subscribe to extensive psycho-analytical investigation, which may have been necessary if this was not the case. Also, more often than not, the high value ascribed to the family has resulted even where ties have been weakened by modernization influences in new surrogate family units that have no biological bases (Obayan, 1995). Consequently, the client is rarely without family support, even when he is outside his immediate family base.

Challenges for counsellor performance and acceptability

The professional in the Nigerian setting therefore finds his performance influenced in many ways by the psycho-social working environment. Since in the first instance the counsellor finds himself operating in an environment of suspicion, extra effort is required to establish trust. He may need to go out of his way to be adopted into the family of the client and even, in some cases, take on approved modes of response and behaviour patterns. This therefore puts a greater demand on him for effective performance.

Secondly, the 'invisible multitudes' that the client brings along into the counselling relationship leads to a 'crowded' session, which makes the counselling encounter neither group nor individual. As such, the counsellor operating in this setting finds it difficult to apply counselling theories because the situation does not fit theoretical prescriptions. In addition, much greater patience and feedback is required for the counselling relationship to make reasonable progress.

Thirdly, the counsellor finds himself constantly learning and relearning the behavioural modes of the client's family and this has to be done for every new client in the counselling encounter. For new counsellors this can be very trying but the situation can subsequently be improved with patience and practice. According to Pullyblank (1974), growth in such a counselling relationship can be facilitated by:

> . . . the counsellor taking the first step to learn the language and meanings
> of interactions in different social context. An initial period is needed to
> submerge oneself into the new environment, learning to communicate in a

cultural awareness can help impart skills that will promote effective counselling even when the counsellor is away from his home and culture.

Challenges for counselling as a profession

A number of challenges have emerged in the course of this write up:

1. The first obvious challenge posed by the preceding discourse is the fact that counselling will need to be relevant to the client's familial and cultural context if it is to be accepted.
2. The organizations involved in counselling such as the Counselling Association of Nigeria will need to work at adopting and adapting a well developed framework that will synchronize the input of the various aspects of the client/family interface as well as other socio-cultural variables as they impact on the counselling relationship.
3. There is an obvious need for concerted effort for the development of new theoretical framework for operations bearing in mind the inadequacies of the current models. In line with this, Sue (1981) has prescribed a move in the direction of cultural diversity in practice, training and research.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at shedding some light on the very important role the client/family interface plays in counselling Nigerian clients, its implications for counsellor performance and acceptability. There is now the obvious need to fill the many gaps that exist both in theory and practice.

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