

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE APPLICATION OF CONFIDENTIALITY IN COUNSELING PRACTICES IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent to which guidance counselors apply confidentiality in counseling practices in secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study adopted survey research design. Eight hundred secondary schools students participated as respondents in this study. Purposive sampling procedure was adopted to select eight (8) local government areas used in this study. A self-structured Application of Confidentiality in Counseling Rating Scale (ACCRS) based on the Likert type of scale was used in collecting data for the study. Mean scores were extracted and used to answer the research question while Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level. The results of this study revealed that guidance counselors kept secret of all the conversations and discussions they had with their clients during their counseling practices and that there was significant difference existing in the perception of secondary school students on extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices. The study also exposed the existence of significant difference in the perception of secondary school students on extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in their counseling practices and that interaction effect did not exist in the perception of male and female secondary school students on the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality during their counseling practices among the secondary schools investigated. It was recommended that both the guidance counselors and the counselees should apply the ethics of confidentiality in their counseling programs therefore keeping secret of all their discussions and that they should ensure that code of ethics of confidentiality in counseling profession is seriously maintained and emphasized.

Keywords: Confidentiality, Counseling, Counseling Profession, Guidance Counselors.

INTRODUCTION

In the school system, students are confronted with some problems, which are in the areas of educational, vocational and personal-social and counseling. In the school system, guidance counselors are required to render their services to these students by aiding them proffer solutions to their problems. In rendering their services, guidance counselors as well as the students are expected to maintain the ethics of confidentiality in the counseling profession; that is, keeping secrecy of whatever discussion the both parties (that is, the guidance counselor and the students) may have had during counseling session. In some cases, students may not have confidence in the guidance counselors because they perceive that they are not applying the ethics of confidentiality in rendering their services, and vice versa.

One of the important elements in counseling that cannot be overlooked is confidentiality. Confidentiality is emphasized in the codes of ethics of counseling profession in which every practicing counselor is strictly expected to adhere to. Gladding (2004) highlighted the ethics as they pertain to counseling in the United States. In Canada, Konrad (2005) examined several codes of ethics that govern the professional practice of counselors. Also in Nigeria, the practice of counseling cannot be completed with the absence of codes of ethics, which confidentiality is part and parcel of. Uzoeshi

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(2003) stressed the need for total confidentiality to be maintained in consultancy services and private practice in counseling. This implies that the counselor must have to keep secret of any information obtained from a client while in private practice unless it will constitute threat to the client or society. Hornby (2001) defined confidentiality as situation in which you expect somebody to keep information secret. From the foregoing therefore it could be concluded that the concept of confidentiality is referred to the act of keeping secret of the information gathered by the counselor during the process of counseling the client.

One of the personal and professional characteristics of the counselor is confidentiality. Closeness emanating from the issue of confidentiality is the ability to keep secret (Ugwuegbulem, 1996). According to Ikpeazu (1996), the ability of the counselor to keep secret is essential to his success as an effective counselor. Uzoeshi (2003) stated that the counselor must keep secret any information collected from his client either through interview or while collecting data through questionnaire, checklist, etc. It is a counselor's duty to ensure that what a client says will be kept in strict confidence (Konrad, 2005). From the literature reviewed so far, it is clear that one major role of the counselor is to keep secret in strict confidence about the information relating to the clients.

Underpinning confidentiality is the Canada (1982)'s Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which asserts that it is fundamental to the security of each person that she/he has the right to control information about him/her and how much to share with others. Okobia (1992) stated that one of the expectations of the clients from the counselors during counseling session is to keep their problems confidential and one of the expectations of the counselor from the clients is to maintain confidentiality. Ikpeazu (1996:94) therefore posited that:

“The counselor should possess the ability to keep information concerning his client confidential; ability to keep client information secret especially socio-personal information will endear him to his client. As part of the counselor's professional ethical code, the counselor is under obligation not to divulge client's information without the permission of the client except in situation that it will affect the client or public negatively”.

The counselor is expected to keep personal discussion he or she has with the client while having counseling sessions with him or her confidentially. A counselor who cannot keep counseling proceedings confidential has the risk of losing his or her clients. In essence, the amount of confidentiality exhibited by the counselor encourages the client to open up and talk more about his or her problem.

Under normal circumstances, a counselor can reveal or disclose information about a client only with the client's written or recorded permission, after discussion if possible, only to agree upon recipients, and for a limited period of time (Daniels & Ferguson, 1999). Confirming this assertion, Uzoeshi (2003:29) stated that:

“Information can only be released to the third party if it will constitute threat to the life of the client or the society. Such information, however, must be released with tact. For example, if a client confides in the counselor that students want to riot, it is the duty of the counselor to inform the school authority without disclosing the identity of the client”.

A counselor is obligated early in the counseling process to advise the client about exceptions to confidentiality, duty to warn and providing counseling to a minor, as laid out by law and his/her code of ethics. Informing a client of these conditions helps the client to decide what information they will reveal in counseling (Daniels & Ferguson, 1999).

Lack of privacy is one of the major factors infringing counselor's role in school setting. Since office are provided to counselors in our schools, counselors are made to share office space with teachers that occupy staff room usually accommodating no less than four teachers depending on the size of the room. The presence of other teachers in a staff room may not permit for possible counseling even where the teacher is a trained and an experienced guidance counselor, and the confidential nature of counseling is evaded and violated if the teacher counsels student in the staff room (Ugwuegbulem, 1996, p. 81) because many teachers have flippant tongues and cannot keep students secret (Iwuama, 1991). By professional training, the counselor is not meant to be a talkative. He or she is expected by

the code of conduct of counseling profession to keep all discussions confidential during counseling proceedings.

From the foregoing, it seems that confidentiality in counseling has become one of the vital issues, which has attracted the attention of several experts in the counseling, profession. This issue has become so worrisome in the minds of the practicing counselors, teachers and clients because some guidance counselors failed to maintain confidentiality in some instances. Also, literatures reviewed so far present the conceptual and theoretical overview of experts' opinions about the issue of confidentiality in counseling practice. This implies that little or no research study has been carried out on the application of the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practice particularly in this part of the world. That being so, a gap in knowledge seems to have been created in which this study will empirically fill. The purpose of this study therefore was to investigate the extent to which guidance counselors apply confidentiality in counseling practices in secondary schools in Rivers State.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

A single research question guided the study, which is: What are the mean responses of male and female students' perception on the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in their schools? The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 5% level of significant:

1. There is no significant difference in the perception of male and female students on the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools.
2. There is no significant difference in the perception of male and female secondary school students on the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in their schools.
3. There is no significant interaction effect in the perception of male and female students on the extent to which guidance counselors applies the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools.

METHOD

The study adopted survey research design. The target population consists of all secondary schools students in Rivers State of Nigeria. Purposive sampling procedure was adopted to randomly select eight (8) local government areas (4 from the rural area and 4 from the urban area of Rivers State) used in this study. For the rural area, the local government areas are Andoni, Etche, Asari-Toru and Emohua and for the urban area, the selected local government areas are Port Harcourt City, Obio/Akpor, Khana and Ahoada East. Stratified random sampling method was used to draw eight (8) secondary schools from the eight (8) selected local government areas. The schools are Government Secondary School (GSS), Ngo Town (Andoni), Government Secondary School (GSS), Okehi (Etche), King's College of Commerce (KCC), Buguma (Asari-Toru) and Rivers State University of Education Demonstration Secondary School (UDSS), Ndele (Emohua). Other schools include Rivers State University of Science and Technology International Secondary School ((RSUSTISS)), Port Harcourt (Port Harcourt City), University of Port Harcourt Demonstration Secondary School (UDSS), Aluu (Obio/Akpor), Birabi Memorial Grammar School (BMGS), Bori (Khana) and Government Secondary School (GSS), Ogbo (Ahoada East). The schools were constituted by the purposive sampling technique. Since all the schools investigated were made up of Senior Secondary School 1 - 3, two streams were randomly drawn from each school and used for the study. The sample consisted of eight hundred (800) (that is, 400 male and 400 female students) respondents drawn from eight (8) selected secondary schools in Rivers State and used for this study as shown on Table 1.

Inquiry method was adopted for this study. Application of Confidentiality in Counseling Rating Scale (ACCRS) was a self-structured questionnaire used in collecting data for the study. The instrument was based on the Likert type of scale. Items were constructed to elicit information from respondents for them to express their view on how they perceive if guidance counselor apply the ethics of

confidentiality in counseling practices in senior secondary schools. In all, the instrument is made up of sixty (60) items.

Table 1: Sample Size Drawn from Rural Area of Rivers State

Sr.no.	School	LGA	Total Sample Size		
			Male	Female	Total
1	GSS, Ngo Town	Andoni	50	50	100
2	GSS, Okehi	Etche	50	50	100
3	KCC, Buguma	Asari-Toru	50	50	100
4	UDSS, Ndele	Emohua	50	50	100
5	RSUSTISS, PH	Port Harcourt City	50	50	100
6	UDSS, Aluu	Obio/Akpor	50	50	100
7	BMGS, Bori	Khana	50	50	100
8	GSS, Ogbo	Ahoada East	50	50	100
Total			400	400	800

Some of the statements were positively and others were negatively cued. For scoring, items, which were positively framed, have scores ranging from 4 to 1, while negatively framed have reversed scores from 1 to 4. The four points scale has options of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1). The total scores on the ACCRS were determined by adding the index of the scale. Also, in measuring the extent to which both the counselors and counselees apply confidentiality during counseling session at the senior secondary schools, scores above 2.5 average point represent the application of confidentiality in counseling while scores below 2.5 average represent the non-application of confidentiality in counseling in the senior secondary schools investigated.

The research instrument was validated by two experts in Educational Measurement and Evaluation as well as two experts in Guidance and Counseling. The reliability of the ACCRS was ascertained with the use of split-half method with reliability coefficient of 0.84, thus showing the adequacy of the instrument. Mean scores were extracted and used to answer a research question and Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to test the three hypotheses.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

What are the mean responses of male and female students' perception on the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in their schools?

Table 2: Computed Mean Ratings of Male and Female Students' Perception on the Extent to which Guidance Counselors apply Ethics of Confidentiality Practices in Counseling Practices

Sr.no	School	Male			Female			Remarks
		N	Response	Mean	N	Response	Mean	
1	GSS, Ngo Town	50	113.5	2.27	50	117.5	2.35	NA
2	GSS, Okehi	50	109.5	2.19	50	110.5	2.21	NA
3	KCC, Buguma	50	111	2.22	50	117	2.34	NA
4	UDSS, Ndele	50	159	3.18	50	167.5	3.35	A
5	RSUSTISS, PH	50	163	3.26	50	165.5	3.31	A
6	UDSS, Aluu	50	165.5	3.31	50	164	3.28	A
7	BMGS, Bori	50	157	3.14	50	166	3.32	A
8	GSS, Ogbo	50	105.5	2.11	50	114.5	2.29	NA
Total		400	1084	2.71	400	1152.5	2.88	A

NA= No application, A= application

Table 2 shows that the mean rating scores of male and students of GSS, Ngo Town, GSS, Okehi, KCC, Buguma, GSS, Ogbo on the extent to which their guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practice in their schools are 2.27(2.35), 2.19(2.21), 2.22(2.34) and

2.11(2.29) respectively, which are lower than the mean point of 2.5. This implies that the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practice in their schools is low. Also, the Table 2 indicates that the mean rating scores of male students of UDSS, Ndele, RSUSTISS, Port Harcourt, UDSS, Aluu and BMGS, Bori concerning the extent to which their guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practice in their schools are 3.18(3.35), 3.26(3.31), 3.31(3.28) and 3.14(3.32) respectively, which are higher than the mean point of 2.5. This means that the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practice in their schools is high. In all, the grand mean rating scores of male and female secondary school students investigated are 2.71 and 2.88 respectively, which are greater than the mean point of 2.5. This shows that students found at the secondary schools investigated are of the perception that their guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in their schools. With this, it shows that guidance counselors keep secret of all their conversations and discussions with their clients in the course of their counseling practices.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the perception of male and female students on the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools.

Table 3: F-ratio Data Summary of 2 X 8 Multifactor Analysis of Variance of the Male and Female Students' Ratings of Guidance Counselors' Application of Confidentiality in Counseling Practices in Secondary Schools in Rivers State

Source of Variation	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F-ratio Cal.	F-ratio Crit.
Between Columns (Secondary schools)	94.96	7	13.57	1.38+	2.1
Between Rows (Male and Female)	47.48	1	47.48	4.83*	3.85
Interaction (Columns and Rows)	125.23	7	17.89	1.82+	2.1
Between Groups	267.67	15	31.61		
Within Groups	7706.72	784	9.83		
Total	7974.39	799			

N = 800, P > .05, df = (1, 7, 784), * = Significant, P < .05, + = Not Significant

The sum of square and mean square of the secondary school students' perception about the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the schools investigated were presented in Table 3. With N = 800, based on the degree of freedom of 7 and 784, for between columns (secondary schools) at 5% level of significance, the calculated F-ratio was 1.38 and the critical value of F-ratio was ± 2.10 . At this juncture therefore, the calculated F-ratio is not statistically significant at $\alpha = .05$ level of significance since it is smaller than the given critical value of F-ratio. The hypothesis (H_{01}) is thus rejected and the conclusion is that there is significant difference in the perception of secondary school students on extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools investigated. It therefore makes no difference in the perception of secondary school students on the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the perception of male and female secondary school students on the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in their schools.

The sum of square and mean square of the male and female secondary school students' perception about the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in secondary schools investigated were presented in Table 3. With N = 800, based on the degree of freedom of 1 and 784, for between rows (gender) at 5% level of significance, the calculated F-ratio was 4.83 and the critical value of F-ratio was ± 3.85 . That being so therefore, the calculated F-ratio is

statistically significant at $\alpha = .05$ level of significance since it is higher than the given critical value of F-ratio. The hypothesis (H_{O2}) is thus accepted and the conclusion is that no significant difference exists in the perception of male and female secondary school students on the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in the secondary schools investigated. It therefore makes no difference in the perception of male and female secondary schools on the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in the secondary schools in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant interaction effect in the perception of male and female students on the extent to which guidance counselors applies the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools.

The sum of square and mean square of the male and female secondary school students' perception about the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the schools investigated were presented in Table 3. With $N = 800$, based on the degree of freedom of 7 and 784, for between columns (secondary schools) and rows (gender) at 5% level of significance, the calculated F-ratio was 1.82 and the critical value of F-ratio was ± 2.10 . At point therefore, the calculated F-ratio is not statistically significant at $\alpha = .05$ level of significance since it is less than the given critical value of F-ratio. The hypothesis (H_{O3}) is thus rejected and the conclusion is that interaction effect exists in the perception of male and female secondary school students on the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools investigated.

DISCUSSION

An aspect of the results of this study revealed that the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practice at GSS, Ngo Town, GSS, Okehi, KCC, Buguma, GSS, Ogbo is low. Also, the extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practice at UDSS, Ndele, RSUSTISS, Port Harcourt, UDSS, Aluu and BMGS, Bori is high. This shows that students found at the secondary schools located at the rural areas perceived that their guidance counselors do not while those found at the secondary schools located at the urban areas of Rivers State were of the opinion that guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in their schools. With this, it implies that guidance counselors keep secret of all their conversations and discussions with their clients in the course of their counseling practices in some schools while in some schools, they do not apply the ethics of confidentiality in their counseling practice.

Another aspect of the results of this study reveals that there is significant difference in the perception of secondary school students on extent to which guidance counselors apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools investigated. It therefore makes difference in the perception of secondary school students on the extent to which guidance counselors' apply the ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools in Rivers State. This confirms the view of Uzoeshi (2003) who stressed the need for total confidentiality to be maintained in consultancy services and private practice in counseling.

In this study it was also revealed that no significant difference exists in the perception of male and female secondary school students on the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in the secondary schools investigated. It therefore makes no difference in the perception of male and female secondary schools on the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices in the secondary schools in Rivers State. This finding corroborates with the views of Ikpeazu (1996) who advocated that the counselor should possess the ability to keep information concerning his client confidential; ability to keep client information secret especially socio-personal information will endear him to his client. Also, the result of this study confirms the opinion of Uzoeshi (2003) who stated that counselor is expected to keep every secret revealed to him by the client while interacting with him as well as that of Ikpeazu (1996) who warned that a counselor who cannot keep secret should quit the profession because no client will ever come to

him for help. In essence, the amount of confidentiality exhibited by the counselor encourages the client to open up and talk more about his problem.

The result of this study also shows that there is an interaction effect existing in the perception of male and female secondary school students on the guidance counselors' application of ethics of confidentiality in counseling practices among the secondary schools investigated. This finding does not differ from the opinions of other writer for Okobia (1992) who rightly pointed out that one of the expectations of the clients from the counselors during counseling session is to keep their problems confidential. This means that one of the expectations of the counselor from the clients is to maintain confidentiality.

CONCLUSION

The code of ethics of confidentiality in counseling has become one of the vital issues, which has attracted the attention of several authors in counseling, guidance counselors, teachers and students. Its application during the counseling session by the guidance counselors is absolutely necessary. In some secondary schools, it is clear that guidance counselors keep secret of all the content of the discussion they have with their student clients during their counseling session. This gives the student clients full assurance that their problems so exposed to their guidance counselors are kept confidential and not being exposed to the hearing of the third party. It is the responsibility of the counselors too to reveal to the counselees early in their counseling process the need for them to also keep their discussion confidentiality in order to keep to the code of ethics of their counseling profession.

It is recommended that there is the need for both the guidance counselors and the counselees to apply the ethics of confidentiality in their counseling programs therefore keeping secret of all their discussions. The ethics of confidentiality enshrined as one of the codes of the ethics of counseling practice and profession should be emphasized for professionals to adhere to. Guidance counselors should ensure that code of ethics of confidentiality in counseling profession is maintained, emphasized and taken seriously.

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