

# The Importance of Ethical Codes in Guidance and Counseling Profession

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**Abstract**— Professional school counselors are trained to modify, help and structure students' behaviour in relation with the social norms and values of society. The codes of ethics and the policies of counseling of a professional counselor must have an impact on the execution of any problems that arises in their professional field or workplace. It is certain/ true that everybody is born with emotions, attitudes, likes and dislikes in the world based on our judgments and standards. Use and misuse of the codes of ethics in Sierra Leone maybe different from that of other countries in the world as we differ in color, race and culture. When we take into account the codes of ethics, the client's interest must be put first above all else. Counseling as a helping profession and a therapeutic relationship is now gaining popularity and taking active part in the society and the world at large. Professional counselors in most parts of the world do not have age limit though there are limitation on experiences. In the local context, professional counselors are guided by professional code of ethics and policies. These code of ethics help to clarify areas of crossover of school counselor and social workers but there are some similarities as both are using the prescribed guidelines. Counseling is generally an area of offering professional help to resolve personal or psychological problems of an individual. Counseling is a profession and humanistic in nature and in character. The rigorous and professional training in guidance and counseling helps the individual to ensure the holistic development of the child. The main aim of the counseling process is to help the child to adjust well in life. Therefore it is imperative that the counselor possesses certain qualities, attributes and moral/ ethics to empower him /her to carry out the gigantic task. Counseling by its very nature is a relationship between a person with a psychological problem and a person who is trained, qualified, and knowledgeable and has the expertise to provide the required solutions. The counselor and client relationship usually involves a degree of intimacy that usually does not exist in other professional relationships.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Most clients are vulnerable so it the sole responsibility of the professional counselor to protect them from unethical behavior of counselors. It is therefore important for certified counselors and social workers to be aware of the counseling ethics. Self-awareness and self-disclosure helps to clarify our short comings. There are deliberate, unavoidable and client's deliberate actions that lead to such disclosure which are not unethical in the codes of ethics in school counseling. This is a way to help the client to relate similar situation to open them for the counseling process and not to provide a solution to their encountered difficulty [Zur, 2011]

Each professional counselor has a lot of responsibilities to sustain/elevate the public trust and must therefore achieve high levels of training, educated and should be supervised in the ethical application of the counseling practices. This is as a result of counselors practicing behind closed doors with oversight of so many rules /codes of ethics. There are a number of guidelines/ rules for professional counselors as they strive to assist clients in an ethical and legal manner.

By nature of the profession, counselors are suppose to act in the best way according to the interest of the client to promote his/her goals, protect client's rights and do not cause harm, maintaining professional boundary in service delivery[Stein, 1990].The inherent power of the relationship between the counselor and the client broadens the expectations of both. The principles, Ethics and ethical codes ensure that the counselor operates for the good of the client and not for self.

Clarkson [2001] contends that all members of a professional association subscribe to their professional's code of ethics for the sake of protecting the public. The degree to

which this protection occurs is based on factors such as [i] the client's awareness and knowledge of the codes of ethics and complaints procedure [ii] the degree to which the client feels they can discuss his or her feelings about a violation with the counselor [iii] the fairness of the codes and the client's ability to manage the code or gain assistance in negotiation.

Professional counseling is a process where the counselor genuinely works with the client to help the client understands existing problems, barriers and potentials in order to facilitate the client's effective use of personal and environmental resources for career, social, personal and community adjustment. Professional counselors provide assistance to individuals for physical and emotional development and independent living.

Leahy et al.[2003] in his research found seven major job functions of a professional counselor which are [i] vocational counseling and consultation, [ii] career counseling, [iii] community-based rehabilitation service activities,[iv] case management, [v] applied research, [vi] assessment and [vii] professional advocacy.

Abdurrahman, A.M, Mohd. Isa, N.J., and Atan, A [2013] reported that in 1998, school counselors are expected to conduct six teaching topics which are studies skills, career guidance, psychosocial and mental health, leadership skills, smoking and drug prevention education and HIV/AIDS PREVENTION EDUCATION UNDER THE NATIONAL education blue print.

According to Abd Rahim Mohd Mustiman et al [2008] Counseling and Psychology Division at the Department of Social Welfare was set up on April 1, 1998 in response to the establishment of Counselors Act 1998 [Act 580] ever since professional counselors are placed in every state. The services granted by the division include individual and group

counseling, marriage and family counseling, career counseling, psychological testing, interactive workshop and crisis intervention. The concept of ethics is related to moral, values and psychological consideration. The challenge then lies in what is considered moral or ethical. Every counselor comes to the profession with their own set of values, principles and standards and how they interpret dilemmas are universally different.

The code of ethics is a general standard or professional guiding principle that the counselors and therapists should or must adhere to and use jointly with legal standards to provide ethical practice and work through ethical dilemma. These ethical codes offer counselors an outline of what are considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. In some region where counseling is not regulated through licensing, ethical codes provide a valuable tool for developing and maintaining ethical conduct.

Professional counseling organizations provide codes of conduct and ethics to members and the inability to stick to these codes may result in removal of membership. A professional may belong to more than one organization and thus have access to additional ethical codes, so that when faced with an ethical dilemma, a counselor may consider all available and applicable codes. It is the counselors' responsibility to be familiar with relevant codes and regulations governing their area of practice. Ethical principles of counseling and psychotherapy are principles that direct attention to important ethical responsibilities of the professional counselor.

Hung (2008) in her report state that there were some secondary school counseling teachers, giving dilemma of professional practices code of ethics, dual relationship and confidentiality. The newly passed code 3 through 6 of Taiwanese practice is giving a general guidelines, it is perceived that provided there is no direct harm and conflict of interests of criminals or self destructive behavior on to the students the counselors can release general details to authority. Prior to all other countries counseling teachers have to teach some subjects as that in Sierra Leone where counseling teachers teach some academic / educational subjects and Moral Ethics codes or educational guiding principles.

Professional counselors have two hats in one role, the dual relationships between the client/student and teacher or parents of the students at any one time. Each counselor went through different techniques from university or colleges of practice.

The aim of this research is to assess and evaluate the codes of ethics in guidance and counseling as practiced by trained and qualified guidance counselors.

#### *Research objectives are*

1. Identify and discuss ethical codes of guidance and counseling.
2. Discuss the effective use of these ethical codes in guidance and counseling.
3. To outline the effects of the misuse of these codes of ethics in counseling.
4. To identify strategies that could be used to combat the misuse of the codes of ethics in counseling

5. Identify and discuss the roles of guidance counselors towards clients in the professional counselling.

#### *Statement of the problem*

Counselors need to be clear about any responsibilities including the ethical codes involved in the professional relationship. The counseling professional relationship is defined by an explicit manner and mutually agreed contact between the parties, the counselor and the client which ends with termination of the contract of the client/social worker or counselor relationships in case management. However, there are certain professional responsibilities that continue beyond the termination of the contract. Counselors need to be open with themselves and clients about the feasibility of working together in a professional relationship.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Kenema City, Nongowa Chiefdom, in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. The study adopted a case study of five secondary schools in Kenema City. The study sample comprised of 250 respondents made up of five principals (5), five guidance counselors (5), 40 teachers and 200 school pupils. The major instruments used to collect data for this study were questionnaire, interview and personal observation. The questionnaires were divided into four sections to reflect each category of respondents and objectives. The questionnaires were pretested to ascertain the appropriateness and uniformity of items. The data collected from the questionnaires, interviews and observation were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data was analyzed in tables and percentages and the qualitative data in narrative form.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The code consists of four overall ethical principles which has a number of specific ethical standards. Respect for the rights and dignity of the client is the first one that says, guidance counselors must honor and promote the fundamental rights, moral and cultural values, dignity and worth of all clients. Counselors must respect clients' rights to privacy, confidentiality, self determination and autonomy, consistent with the law. As far as possible, they ensure that clients understand and consent to whatever professional action they propose.

This means they have sensible regard for clients' moral and cultural values and do not allow their services to be diminished because of factors such as gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, race, ethnicity, age, national origin, party politics and social class. Always respect the rights of clients to receive full explanation of the nature, purpose and result of tests and assessment in language that they can understand. Seek full and active participation as possible from others in decision that affect them and ensure that consultations with clients are done in conditions of appropriate privacy and confidentiality.

Competence- guidance counselors maintain and update their professional skills. They should recognize the limits of their expertise engage in self care and seek support and supervision to maintain the standard of their work. Counselors

must offer only those services for which they are qualified by education, training and experience. Recognize the limits of and take care not to exceed their training and experience. Where a counselor does not feel competent, make appropriate referral to others within or outside the profession.

Seek support or supervision from colleagues when feeling stressed or vulnerable due to professional duties. Professionals should or must provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, license, certification, consultation received, supervised experiences, or other relevant professional experiences.

Responsibility- guidance counselors must be aware of their professional responsibility to act in a trustworthy, reputable and accountable manner towards clients, colleagues and the community in which they work and live. They must avoid doing harm and take responsibility of their professional actions and adopt a systematic approach to resolving ethical dilemmas. Behave in professional activities in such a way as not to damage clients' interests or undermine public confidence in the profession. Terminate any activity that is clear to be harmful than beneficial to the client. Try to use a systematic procedure for investigating ethical issues and resolving ethical dilemmas.

Integrity is to seek and promote steadfast adherence in their practice. They represent themselves accurately and treat others with honesty, straightforwardness and fairness. They deal actively with conflicts of interest, avoid exploiting others and are alert to inappropriate behavior on the part of colleagues. Counselor must not seek or accept fees or benefits beyond those agreed contractually in advance or significant gifts where such acceptance would undermine impartially. Do not exploit clients emotionally, sexually, financially or in any other way and take action when a colleague appears to be acting unethically the effective use of the codes of ethics in counseling. Professionals should or must be conscious of the following:

Trustworthiness, honesty in service delivery, maintaining professionalism, empathy, transparency, competence in handling client case or cases, respect for client self-determination or consent in service delivery, awareness of their professional status and boundary limitation in case management and respect the dignity and worth of the clients.

The professional counselor's personal moral qualities are of utmost importance to clients. Many of the personal qualities considered important is the provision of services have an ethical or moral component and are therefore considered as virtues or good personal qualities. It is not appropriate that all professional counselors possess these qualities, since it is the groundwork that these personal qualities are deeply rooted in the person concerned. These maybe developed out of personal commitment rather than the requirement of an external authority.

Personality qualities to which counselors must strongly encourage to aspire are –the ability to communicate understanding of another's feelings, experience or feel as the person feels for the moment you are with him/her –that is empathy.

Sincerity is a personal commitment to consistency between what is professed and what is done.

Integrity is commitment to being moral in dealings with others, personal straight forwardness, honesty and obedience.

The capacity to work with the client's concern without being personally diminished that is resilience. Counselor must work with client without reducing the dignity and the worth of the client. Must have regard for and hold the client in high esteem. Always respect by showing appropriate regard for others and their understanding of themselves.

Also have the ability to assess accurately and acknowledge one's own strength and weaknesses. To be effective and have the skills and knowledge needed to do the correct things or what is required of you. Be fair with by applying the appropriate skills to informed decisions and actions and wisdom of sound judgment and courage.

The clients are vulnerable so it is very important to protect them from unethical behavior of counselors. It is therefore important for certified counselors and social workers to be aware of the counseling ethics. In philosophy, ethical behavior is known as what is good or right / as a science that studies morality. The welfare of the client is the sole responsibility of the counselor. All decisions made regarding the care and treatment of the client must be made with respect and to foster the well being of the client.

The social world is very messy and ethics helps us to muddle through our problems. All of morality aims at the same thing but there are several ways to get there. The approaches of ethics are virtue ethics, consequentialist ethics and deontological or duty based. Each of these approaches provided different way to understanding ethics [May 18, 2012]. In ethics no school answers all the problems raised by society. All of these schools need to be considered in order to reach ethical decisions. The core values of the counselor are a set of attitudes and skills which have a special regard for the integrity, authority and autonomy of the client and are firmly based on the counselor having total respect for universal human rights for the person and cultural differences.

The counselor's primary duty is to care for the client; therefore counselors must not only consider themselves when making ethical choices but to all concern and the greater community [Ax ten, 2002]. Counseling does not take place in isolation; therefore it is important that counselors acknowledge all areas of practice both internally and externally.

Ross [2002] further ask counselors to look at ethics from the holistic perspectives such as the environment, structures, systems, laws, regulations, moral codes, policies, social norms, emotions, values and spirit.

The training requirement for professional counselors and practicum may differ prior to full time practicing in school environment. It is important to look at the number of practicum hours for undergraduates that varies from part-time and full-time students being the arguable points for practiced. Therefore it was settled that all must have less than hundred and eighty plus hours of practical as trainee throughout the undergraduates studies and before Masters Degree (UM, 2014).

There is lack of students' responses in cases when students are referred involuntarily to counselors as was noticed during an interview during my research and training and students would spend the whole counseling time in silence. This is because most students still have the idea seeing a counselor, reflects that one is not totally healthy mentally. It is advisable not to force the students to talk to allow time to make friends with them.

#### IV. SUMMARY

The code of ethics cannot resolve all ethical issues, but it does provide a framework within which ethical and practice related dilemmas might be addressed. Professional counselors are responsible for making careful judgment about which parts of this code apply to particular situations. Counselors seek to help clients to increase their understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. It helps them to develop more resourceful ways of living and bring about change in their lives. Counseling includes forming relationship with individuals, couples, families, groups, communities and organizations. Professional counselors are recognized upon passing an exam or successfully completing the adaptation period that provides the formation of professional relationships based on counseling values and ethical practice. Full recognition is given if the content and duration of training largely coincide and partial recognition may be granted if training content differs in part. Professional practices include work in the fields of counseling, supervision, therapy, training, education, research, advocacy, consultancy, management, coaching, community work, group facilitation and mentoring. Personal qualities of the professional counselor may include empathy, sincerity, integrity, resilience, respect, humility, competence, fairness, wisdom and courage. When counselors are allowed to apply the ethical principles, they are provided with solutions to ethical dilemmas. Counselors acknowledge client autonomy and respect this right unless it interferes with the autonomy of others. Non-male fierce is the principle of 'do no harm' in which counselors do not undertake and actively avoid activities that could be detrimental to clients. Beneficence involves doing well both within the counseling relationship and as a member of the greater community. Justice entitles client to treatment based on fairness and equity. The counselor acting in a manner that is non-discriminatory. Fidelity is based on trust within the client-counselor relationship.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The challenge of working ethically means that the professional counselor will surely encounter situations where there are competing obligations that can give the cause of someone retreating from all ethical analysis. This is done to escape a sense of what may appear to be irresolvable ethical tension. These ethics are meant to be of assistance in such circumstances by directing attention to the various ethical factors that may need to be taken into considerations and to be an alternative of approaching ethics that may prove more useful. The professional counselor's moral qualities are of utmost importance to all clients. Most of the moral qualities

considered important in the provision of services have ethical or moral component and are therefore considered as virtues of good personal qualities. It is not correct to assume that all professionals possess these qualities. It is fundamental that these personal qualities are deeply rooted in the person concerned and developed out of commitment rather than the requirement of an external authority. It is not certain that ethics can totally alleviate the difficulty of making professional judgment in circumstances that may be constantly changing and full of uncertainties. Professionals are committing themselves to engaging with the challenge of striving to be ethical which involves making difficult decisions or acting courageously.

#### VI. RECOMMENDATION

- Encourage clients to participate in all discussions that affect them.
- Encourage clients to self-determination in service delivery
- Maintain confidentiality in dealing with client case or any material or documents relating to the client case
- Observe and identify clients' behaviors, attend to and acknowledge them.
- Clarify and summarize clients feelings and statements
- Always use/ask open and close questions when dealing with clients.
- Impart information to the client where necessary and be a role model.
- Empathize with clients and confront negative behavior.
- Help clients to integrate and apply what they learn and attribute meaning to the experience.
- Demonstrate ethical and professional standards of group practice
- Keep the clients on task and help them to accomplish and shared their goals.
- Professionals should or must adhere to professional evaluation during and after service delivery to the clients.
- Professionals should or must not solicit finance or involve in any misconduct or fraudulent ways in their service delivering to clients

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