

# THE RATIONALE FOR THE APPLICATION OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS BY PRACTISING COUNSELLORS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ANAMBRA STATE.

**Roseline Ekwutosi Umezulike (Ph.D)**  
**Vera Nkiru Nwadinobi (Ph.D)**  
**Dorothy Mmaegbunam Afunugo (Ph.D)**

## Abstract

This study investigated the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors in secondary schools in Anambra state. As individual counsellors differ in their thought process as regards to the approach to issues of professional concern, there is need for a standard rule that will safeguard them from problems and dilemmas as well as protect and conserve the image of the counselling profession. The sample consisted of 120 professional counsellors from the three senatorial zones of Anambra state of Nigeria. 40 professional counsellors were selected by stratified random sampling from 40 secondary schools in each of the 3 senatorial zones of the State. Only professional - qualified counsellors were used for the study. Descriptive survey method was used and three research questions were generated to guide the study. The research instrument was a well- structured questionnaire which consisted of 30 items used to answer the research questions. The instrument was validated by experts in the Guidance and Counselling Department of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and the reliability coefficient of the instrument was established at 0.82. The data collected were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviation. The findings of the study revealed the reasons why counsellors need a code of ethics to include maintaining a standard, to clarify responsibilities and to moderate their actions, among others. Also revealed were some aspects of the code of ethics to include confidentiality and privileged communication, malpractice, negligent actions among others. Finally, the study found out the desirable benefits of the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors to include maintenance of professional standard, boosting the profession's image and protecting the rights of counsellors, among others. The paper recommended, among others that a publication of the ethical code for counsellors should be made available to all qualified practising counsellors; counselling association of Nigeria (CASSON) should ensure, through its regular conferences and seminars, that the issue of the application of professional ethics should be highlighted and emphasized.

**Keywords:** profession, ethics, counsellors.

## Introduction

No profession can command public confidence except it has yardsticks that are standardized, comprehensive, objective and measurable for judging the performance of its members. A profession is an occupation in which members of a corporate group assume minimum competence for entry into the occupation by setting and enforcing standards for selection, training and licensure or certification (Akinade, 2010).

Hornby (2016), on the other hand, defines a profession as a type of job that needs special training or skill, especially one that needs a high level of education. In the world today, many people look forward to rules and regulations to guide their activities and behaviours. This is also true of organization and professional bodies, and counselling is no exception. It is these rules and regulations that are called ethical codes. They are necessary instruments that act as checks and balances towards entrenching good conduct and professionalism; and to

institutionalize accountability, quality assurance and best professional practices (Oramah, 2015). Ethics refers to a system of moral philosophy or science of morality which seeks to establish guidelines by which human character and action may be judged as good or bad, right or wrong (Nwamuo & Ajoku 2007). Akinade (2010) also defines ethics as a philosophical discipline that is concerned with human conduct and moral decision - making. He states that ethics are normative in nature and focus on principles and standards that govern relationships between individuals, such as counsellor and clients. Professional ethics are principles that define the ethical behaviour of members of professional groups. They are guidelines that specify the expected behaviour or actions of members of a professional organization or body. They include a list of activities stretching from general professional behaviour and responsibility, counselling relationships, consulting and private practice, research and publication to counsellor education, training and supervision. They guide the actions of the practitioner and inform the public of expected standards of professional practices and behaviour. They are dedicated to the enhancement of the worth, dignity, potential and uniqueness of the clients (Nwamuo & Ajoku, 2007). The professional ethics for counsellors emphasize the conduct of appropriate healthy and acceptable relationships among clients, colleagues, other professionals and the general public. Ifelunni (1999) believes that the major purposes for professional ethics for counsellors arise from the following:

- To save profession's image
- To gain society's approval
- To provide counsellors with a framework on which to act

- To get counsellors' commitment
- To enhance dignity and worth of counsellors
- To guide different idiosyncrasies of counsellors.

It is on this note that this study set out to investigate the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors in secondary schools in Anambra State of Nigeria.

## Statement of Problem

Various acclaimed professions have professional ethics that guide their members. For instance, the legal practitioners term theirs "rules of professional conduct" and the same is true for the medical practitioners, the engineers, the nurses and so on. These professional ethics, usually encapsulated as a code of ethics have the onerous duty of ensuring that the members of the profession are well guided in their practice. Using a code of ethics implies that professionals will become more committed to their clients and to the profession. The area of professional ethics in counselling provides a base for a healthy counselling practice. Since counselling is a relatively new profession in Nigeria there is need for it to meet the expected standards of a profession as regards the ethical behaviour of its practitioners. It will be surprising to hear that a qualified civil engineer has conformed to all the ethical standards and yet has constructed a building that subsequently collapsed. It is either the civil engineer is not professionally qualified or that the ethical considerations for a civil engineer have been compromised. The high expectations of the society for worthwhile professions dictate that practising counsellors must apply the professional ethics of their profession.

This is why this study has set out to investigate the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors in Anambra State of Nigeria.

### Purpose of the Study

Generally, the study investigated the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors in Anambra State. Specifically, the study determined

1. The reasons why practising counsellors need to apply professional ethics.
2. The professional ethics required by practising counsellors.
3. The desirable benefits derivable from the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors.

### Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the study:

1. What are the reasons why practising counsellors need to apply professional ethics?
2. What professional ethics are required to be applied by practising counsellors?
3. What are the desirable benefits derivable from the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors?

### Methodology

#### Research Design

The research design adopted for the study was descriptive survey. This design was chosen because the study sought for information as well as opinions from respondents on why practising counsellors need to apply professional ethics (Osegbo, Ifeakor and Enemuo, 2009).

#### Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised all the practising counsellors

in two hundred and fifty three (253) Secondary Schools spread across Anambra State with at least one practising counsellor (Source: P.P.S.S.C., Awka).

### Sample and Sampling Techniques

Out of the two hundred and fifty three (253) practising counsellors in the Senatorial Zones of Anambra State, Stratified random sampling technique (disproportionate) was used to select 120 practising counsellors based on qualification: Anambra North Senatorial Zone 45 counsellors, Anambra Central Senatorial Zone 56 counsellors, and Anambra South Senatorial Zone 19. The selected practising counselors must have at least a master's degree in Guidance and counselling to satisfy their Profession status.

### Instrumentation

A 30 – items researchers structured questionnaire on the rationale for the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors in Secondary Schools in Anambra State (TRFAPEPCSS) was used to answer the research questions. A 4-point Likert scale of strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) was used to answer the questionnaire items.

### Validity and Reliability of Instrument

To ensure the validity of this instrument, two (2) experts in the Department of Guidance and Counselling of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka were consulted for evaluation and final approval to confirm the instrument as adequate, appropriate and valid. The reliability of the instrument was determined with a reliability coefficient of 0.82 obtained,

indicating that the instrument is reliable

### .Method of Data Collection

The researchers with the help of six (6) research assistants (2 from each Senatorial Zone) used face to face administration by going to the Schools of the practising counsellors. The counsellors were instructed on how to fill the questionnaire and were encouraged to do so honestly. The researchers with the research assistants collected back the questionnaire from the respondents on the spot to avoid any loss.

### Method of Data Analysis

The data collected from the respondents through questionnaire were used to answer the research questions using statistically weighted mean and standard deviation. Mean value of 2.50 was used as the midpoint of the scale of decision and therefore accepted as an indication of agreement with the opinion item while mean value below 2.50 was rejected.

### Results

#### Research question 1:

What are the reasons why practising counsellors need to apply professional ethics?

**Table 1:** Mean score and standard deviation of the responses on the reasons why practising counsellors need to apply professional ethics.

S/N	Item	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
1	Need for a position on standard	2.81	0.99	Accepted
2	Clarification of responsibilities to clients	2.67	1.04	Accepted
3	Need for guideline for moderation of actions	2.97	1.07	Accepted
4	Protection of image of the profession	2.55	1.16	Accepted
5	Safeguarding of privacy and integrity	2.54	1.07	Accepted
6	Protection of public interest.	2.64	1.01	Accepted
7	To ensure profiteering on the society.	2.10	0.98	Rejected
8	To be able to compete with the older professions	2.64	0.98	Accepted
9	To maintain public trust and confidence	2.57	0.97	Accepted
10	To victimize counsellors and discourage interest in the profession.	1.68	0.80	Rejected

The respondents agreed that items 1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9 are the reasons why practising counsellors require professional ethics. They however, rejected items 7 and 10.

#### Research question 2:

What professional ethics are required to be applied by practising counsellors?

**Table 2:** Mean scores and standard deviation of responses on the professional ethics required to be applied by practising counsellors.

S/N	ITEM	X	SD	DECISION
11	Confidential relationship and privilege Communication	2.56	0.99	Accepted
12	Respect for the rights and dignity of the client	2.65	0.87	Accepted
13	No sexual intimacy with clients.	2.63	1.05	Accepted
14	Consultation with other professionally competent persons about the client	2.59	1.09	Accepted
15	No discrimination against the clients based on age, colour, culture, ethnicity, disability, gender, religion, sexual orientation marital or socio-economic status	2.58	0.88	Accepted
16	Arrogance and non accountability during practice	2.04	0.68	Rejected
17	Making of appropriate referral to others within or outside the profession in recognition of limits of competence, education and training.	2.63	0.99	Accepted
18	Maintain and develop their professional competence by seeking knowledge through seminars, conferences and workshops.	2.69	0.88	Accepted
19	Ensure adequate remuneration before handling a client's case as is the case in the medical profession	2.02	0.83	Rejected
20	Responsibility to work within the limits of the laws of the land recognizing and respecting the cultural expectations, values, mores, belief systems, taboos e.t.c.	2.67	1.13	Accepted

On the professional ethics by practising counsellors, the respondents agreed that these include confidential relationship and privilege communication, respect for the rights and dignity of the client, no sexual intimacy with clients, consultation with other professionally competent persons about the client, among others. Item 16 was however, rejected as to arrogance and non-accountability during practise being one of the professional ethics required to be applied by practising counsellors. Also, item 19 was not accepted as one of the professional ethics required to be applied by practising counsellors based on the perception of the respondents because the mean was lower than the decision rule of 2.50.

**Research Question 3:**

What are the derivable benefits from the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors?

**Table 3:** Mean scores and standard deviation of responses on the derivable benefits from the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors.

S/N	ITEM	X	SD	DECISION
21	Maintenance of professional standard.	2.69	0.95	Accepted
22	Manifestation of functional values and usefulness of the counselling services to the society.	2.65	1.05	Accepted
23	Guarantee of quality and safety assurance	2.60	0.85	Accepted
24	Clarification of counsellor's responsibilities to the client, the profession and other stakeholders in society.	2.55	1.13	Accepted
25	Maintenance of high standards of behaviour and the principle of honesty and trustworthiness	2.54	1.06	Accepted
26	Promotion of high standards in order to maximize remuneration for counsellors	2.50	0.98	Accepted
27	Maintenance of public trust and non-exploitation of clients and protection of the public.	2.59	1.00	Accepted
28	Safeguarding counsellors' privacy and integrity	2.59	1.13	Accepted
29	Promotion of discipline and professionalism in the counselling profession.	2.78	1.02	Accepted
30	Provide guidelines for counsellors to moderate their actions and work within limits.	2.56	0.99	Accepted

The respondents accepted items 21-30 as the derivable benefits from the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors. Hence such derivable benefits include: maintenance of professional standard, manifestation of functional values and usefulness of the counselling services to the society, guarantee of quality and safety assurance among others.

**Discussion**

Every profession worth its name must have professional ethics which are moral principles and professional values. Using a code of ethics implies that professionals will become more committed to the client and to the profession. This study revealed the reasons why practising counsellors need to apply professional ethics. These range from the need for a position on standard clarification of responsibilities to client's need for guideline for moderation of

actions, protection of the image of the profession, safeguarding of privacy and integrity of the counsellor to protection of public interest ensuring ability to compete with older professions and maintaining public trust and confidence. This finding is in line with that of Park-Brown, Thomas and Seymour (2008), who noted that a code of ethics will help clarify the counsellors' responsibility to the client, and protect the client from the counsellor's violation, or failure to fulfill these responsibilities. Ethics are important in counselling, as they are means to protect the welfare of the client and counsellors by clearly outlining what is appropriate. Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2012), agrees with the findings when it states that code of ethics is designed to regulate the professional activities of guidance counsellors. Nwamuo & Ajoku (2007), also agree with the findings of this study when they posit that code of ethics are intended to maintain public trust in the profession of

counselling and in counsellors as well as protect the public and make counsellors accountable. Ifelunni (1997)'s, position also tally with the findings of this study. He states that ethics tend to guide the image of the counselling association by restraining members from any behaviour likely to tarnish the image of the profession. He stated that above all, ethical code is needed in any profession or association where more than one person is in a relationship with one another to guide the different idiosyncrasies of the different members and guide and direct the action of members towards ensuring the continued existence of the association. This study also revealed the professional ethics that are required to be applied by practising counsellors to include confidential relationship and privilege communication, respect for the rights and dignity of the client, no sexual intimacy with clients, consultation with other professionally competent persons about the client among others. This finding is in line with the stipulation of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2012), which stated that the code of ethics consists of four overall ethical principles which subsume a number of specific ethical standards viz respect for the rights and dignity of the client, competence responsibility and integrity. Nwamuo & Ajoku (2007), also agree with this finding when they stated that the expectations for ethical conduct are often based on the following fundamental principles, respect for the dignity of persons, not willfully harming others, integrity in relationships, responsible caring, responsibility to society and respect for self-determination. As a guide for the counselling profession members of the Counselling Association of Nigeria

(CASSON) have adopted the code of professional ethics used by the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) which are made on four major principles viz. commitment to the clients, commitment to the profession, commitment to himself (counsellor) and commitment to the society. This adoption by CASSON is in agreement with the findings of this study as to the professional ethics required to be applied by practising counsellors.

From the responses of the counsellors this study revealed the derivable benefits from the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors. Such benefits include maintenance of professional standard, manifestation of functional values and usefulness of the counselling services to the society, guarantee of quality and safety assurance clarification of counsellor's responsibilities, maintenance of high standards of behaviour and the principle of honesty and trustworthiness and promotion of high standards and the maintenance and protection of public trust, among others. Carew (2011) stated that most professionals who show strict ethical and moral standards enjoy trust, respect and confidence from others. This statement is in line with the findings of this study which has outlined the derivable benefits from the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors. Carew (2011) summed it up when he stated that practising counsellors are not expected to be involved in dubious deals, obnoxious activities and corrupt tendencies that can bring their names and that of the profession to disrepute. Oramah (2015) sums up thus-ethical codes are necessary instruments that act as checks and balances toward entrenching good

conduct and professionalism; and to institutionalize accountability, quality assurance and best professional practices.

### **Conclusion**

The study investigated the rationale for the application of professional ethics by practising counsellors in secondary schools in Anambra State of Nigeria. That the professional trained person, called the counsellor, needs professional ethics, is not in doubt. This study has made findings in such aspects as the reasons why these professional ethics are to be applied by practising counsellors, the professional ethics required, and the derivable benefits from such application. As counselling is a professional organization and a helping relationship that deals with interaction between persons, it requires a guiding principle to regulate the activities of its members just like the other reputable professions. This study has found cogent reasons why practising counsellors should apply professional ethics. The use of specialized skills, like those possessed by counsellors, must be controlled to avoid excessive usage and manipulation that will infringe on client's welfare. Counsellors therefore need a standard code for operation. The professional ethics also give the profession some assurance that the practices of members will not be detrimental to its general functions and purposes. In addition, the society is given some guarantee that the services of the counsellors will demonstrate a sensible regard for social codes and moral expectations of the community in which they work. The counsellors are also protected against possible manipulation or exploitation by

a vengeful or disturbed client. It is by the diligent and religious application of these professional ethics by practising counsellors that the counselling profession grows from strength to strength and assumes its rightful role and position in the society.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations are made as follows:

1. Government at all levels should ensure that only professionally-qualified and licensed counsellors should be allowed to practice. The use of the so-called "teacher-counsellors" should be abolished and discouraged.
2. The Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) should ensure, through its regular conferences and seminars, that the issue of the application of professional ethics should be highlighted and emphasized.
3. Awards should be given to the best counsellor who has demonstrated the application of professional ethics during practice and such demonstration made public.
4. A publication of the ethical code for counsellors should be made available to all qualified practising counsellors.

## References

- Akinade, E.A. (2010). *Dictionary of Guidance & Counselling (Counselling Psychology)*. Ibadan: Olu-Akin.
- Carew, P.F.C. (2011). Challenges for professionalism in contemporary counseling practice. In LA. Kolo (ed.). *Challenges of professionalism in contemporary counseling practice: Multiculturalism, Cross cultural considerations and best practices from Nigeria's perspective*. Lapai: CASSON.
- Hornby, A.S. (2016). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Ifelunni, I.C.S. (1997). *Psychometric and ethical considerations in counseling*. Enugu: Auto Century.
- Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2012). Code of ethics of institute of Guidance Counsellors. <http://www.igc.i.e/About-US/Code-of-Ethics>. Last visited on 14/2/2012.
- Nwamuo, P.A. (2007). Review of professional ethics in counselling. In Nwamuo, P.A. & Ajoku, M.U. (eds.) *Ethical and Legal Concerns in Counselling Psychology*. Owerri: Joe Mankpa.
- O r a m a h , E . U . ( 2 0 1 5 ) . Professionalization of counseling practice in Nigeria through the Bill of the National Assembly: A Reflection of possible implications. *The Counsellors*,34(1) pp 78-87.
- Park-Brown, S.P., Thomas, T.L. and Seymour, J.M. (2008). Infusing professional ethics not consellor education programs: A multicultural/social justice perspective. *Journal of Counselling and Development* 86(3): 296-302.