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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### The Challenges of Professionalising Counseling in Africa

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#### Abstract

The counselling profession is a relatively new professional discipline in Africa. However, counselling services have traditionally been provided albeit by non professionals. Traditional counsellors in Africa have always been elderly or mature close relations such as Uncles, Aunts and close family friends (*Sahwira*). The social standing of the preferred traditional counsellors varies from country to country. However, the underlying criteria remained that of a trusted confidant who was capable of assisting individuals with their personal problems. The traditional counselling set up was sufficient and suitable for the past closely knit rural communities of Africa. Today's enlarged socio-economic environment has necessitated that multi sectoral counselling services be availed hence the emergence of professional counselling in Africa. Professional counselling as a discipline in Africa has been plagued by a number of problems. The role of professional counselling is still being questioned, for example were does the professional counsellor fit in the existing industry and commerce? And is professional counselling relevant to Africa? The paper attempts to answer these questions and explores the importance attached to professional counselling in various sectors. The paper highlights the significance of increased professional training of counsellors in broadening counselling as a professional discipline in Africa.

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#### Introduction

The profession of counseling as a helping profession has been viewed in the eyes of Western practices, resulting from the pioneering work of Freud's psychoanalytic approach counseling has always existed in Africa (Richards, 2000) albeit not in the Western sense but in various forms of African culture. In Zimbabwe, for example, counsellors were often found in every village being an elderly man or woman who has gathered wisdom over the years of his or her life. Among the Shona speaking, a counselor was known as chipangamazano (the one who gives advice, ideas and solutions). Chakuchichi and Zvaiva (2010) pointed out that it was then possible for people with problems to visit such counsellors and tell them their problems. Parents used to send their adolescent children to such

counselors or advisers to be given information about growing up and marriage practices and expectations.

Group counseling was done by a group of elders, be they women and men in many tribes in Southern and Eastern Africa especially during the performance of rites of passage as the children's transition from childhood or womanhood. Chakuchichi and Zvaiva (2010) argued that children and youths ready for this practice would be taken out of the village to a temporary shelter where they were given adequate knowledge including growing up and sex knowledge. This type of counseling was often undertaken as a ritual with certain acts such as circumcision for males to mark the transition into adulthood. Sommer and Sandtrock (2005) asserted that in the African cultures, rites of passage are the avenue by which

youth gain access to sacred adult practices, responsibilities, knowledge and sexuality.

In the Africa context, counseling and advisement were not taken as a paid service but a contribution towards the development of upright citizens of society (Chakuchichi and Zvaiva). The onus was upon the person who received the wise counsel to offer a token of appreciation, especially when he/she had overcome the problem, anxiety or task. It therefore means that the type of counseling today is pro-western and runs contrary to the African counseling perspective, practice and or expectations.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Counseling

Maunganidze and Chigwedere (2000) defined counseling as a process used to help people achieve greater levels of self-awareness and to actualize latent potential. It is also a process employed to relieve symptoms of emotional or behavioral dysfunction or distress.

### Professionals

The term is used to identify all workers who operate at an advanced performance level, who have had a rigorous training, or who take pay for their work (Houle 1980)

### Professionalism

Professionalism refers to proceeds during which education takes place before and during practice (Houle 1980)

Historically society was served by relatively few professions i.e. medicine, law and religion, as most noted. In the early study of professions, scholars identified a set of specific criteria which could be applied to occupations in order to determine their status. Through the professionalization process, skills, techniques and knowledge were detached from the public (Morn 1980)

### Professionalization of counseling in Africa

According to Houle (1980) there are three groups of characteristics which reflect the professionalization of an occupation:

- Conceptual characteristics
- Performance characteristics
- Collective identity

### Conceptual Characteristics

A profession must state and define the mission and foundations of its practice. This definition may not be congruent with the realities of practice, due to the fact that a professional actually may not be consistent

with the stated mission of the profession. This may be due to organizational dynamics or a response to changing societal needs. Evolving societal needs also affect the mission of a profession due to professional knowledge, which is pluralistic, socially constructed, contextually defined and constantly altering (Houle 1980).

### Performance Characteristics

There are four characteristics in this group which refers to the knowledge and skill base of professional practice. They are the mastery of theoretical knowledge, capacity to solve problems and self enhancement.

- **Mastery of theoretical knowledge**  
The theoretical philosophy provided a guide to describe and understand the problems and circumstances of world as applicable to the particular occupational area.
- **Capacity to solve problems**  
Houle (1980) proposes that the ultimate test of the success of a professional is the ability to solve problems and those problems usually involve vital and deeply significant outcomes
- **Use of practical Knowledge**  
Practical knowledge consists of techniques and strategies which are based in theoretical inquiry and that have been found useful in experience
- **Self –enhancement**  
Self enhancement refers to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding in those areas of study and specialization
- **Collective Identity**  
Professionalization of an occupation depends on the establishment of a collective identity through structures and systems that fosters and maintain the conceptual and competency characteristics. Houle (1980) identified the following collective identity characteristics:
  - **Formal training**  
This characteristic refers to the formal processes for the transmission of the explanatory theories, doctrines, applied theories and practice theories (Houle 1980)
  - **Creation of a sub-culture.**  
A profession should nurture a subculture of attributes which distinguish it from other

occupations. This subculture promotes a professional identity that enhances the field's uniqueness.

- **Legal reinforcement**

Professions should seek legislative, judicial and administrative support or ruling to protect the rights of practice, such as the right to practice the profession and the right to maintain confidentiality (Houle 1980)

- **Public acceptance**

The general public should be made aware of a profession's value to society. Houle (1980) states that the inception of a new occupation implies that certain specific work activities are valued enough such that those activities become distinctively differentiated from others and publicly recognized

- **Ethical Practice**

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- **Ethical Practice**

Professions should develop guidelines or codes for ethical practice. A professional code of ethics essentially describes the terms of relations to the client, other professionals and society

- **Penalties**

Professional members who are incompetent or who act in an unethical manner may face penalties that include financial sanctions, exclusion or expulsion from special privileges and the ultimate sanction, termination of the right to practice. Professional associations may serve as formal disciplinary bodies.

- **Relations to the users of service**

The formal relationship between practitioners and the people who use their professional services need to be stated clearly.

The structural attributes of a profession include creation of a formal education formation of a professional association, the support of the law and information of a code of ethics (Underwood and Edumunds 2003)

According to Altbach (1995:114) the following are common elements of a profession:

- Prolonged and specialized training based upon a systematized intellectual tradition and can be acquired through apprenticeship
- Rigorous standards of licensure, fulfillment of which often confers upon the functionary a degree or title signifying specialized competence
- Application of techniques of such intricacy that competency tests cannot be deduced upon any simple continuum scale.
- Absence of precise contractual terms of work, which might otherwise imply calculated limitation of output.
- A limitation upon the self-interest of the practitioner, and careful insulation of professional considerations from extraneous matters, such as private opinions, economic interest and class position
- Certain positive obligation to the profession and its clientele.

It is critical to note that not every profession embodies all the above elements, but the above features enables one to differentiate the other generic type occupation.

### **Challenges facing professional counseling in Africa**

Professional counseling faces many challenges in Africa, and these include the challenge for it to be viewed as authentic and systematic. Many African countries do not have professional counseling boards, and as a result, counseling services are being offered in fits and starts. The absence of recognized professional counselling boards means that, this profession is still in its infancy, as compared to the Western world. In Zimbabwe, for example, the Zimbabwe Association of Family Therapist and Professional Counsellors (ZAFTPC) is struggling to have its board registered as a professional counseling board with the Health Council of Zimbabwe, and up to now, the struggle is still on going.

Counseling in Africa has not been regarded as a paid service, and this culture also presents a challenge to the professional counsellors in Zimbabwe. Professional counseling requires that the client should be prepared to pay for the service he or she receives, and yet this runs contrary to the cultural expectations of most people in Africa. The reluctance of many African people to pay for counseling presents a major challenge to the professionalization of counseling in Africa, it needs clients, whose funds may assist in the growth of the profession.

In many African societies, including Zimbabwe, a stranger is not supposed to know the secrets of the family. Among the Shona speaking people, telling a stranger the secrets of the family is condemned in the strongest sense, as it is regarded as "kufukura hapwa" (divulging family secrets). This cultural aspect also stands as a challenge to the professionalization of counseling in Africa. Many African people, especially in Zimbabwe prefer to go to uncles, aunts, grandfathers, grandmothers and family friends for counseling than to go to a professional counselor. It is against this background that African cultural practices stand in the way of professional growth of counseling in Africa

Counseling as a practice is still in the milieu of Western oriented practiced of a table and chair or the Famous Freudian relaxing couch. The setting is quite formal whereas, in the African context counseling takes place in situ. Counselling in African societies is quite informal but effective. This scenario among the Africans captures the essence of truly African counseling setting in modern days. Many African women have their own natural help seeking support networks and activities. Within their everyday surroundings, African women counsel each other in church, communities, beauty shops, sitting side-by-side in cars, buses, or trains en route not only for physical beautification, but a space for information change and vicarious learning. African women are able to sit, listen, and learn about how another individual may have dealt with a presenting problem (for instance, relationships, children, finances). Group counseling and discussions in a less formal environment seem quite appealing for Afrocentric counseling practices and this directly militates against the professionalization of counseling in Africa

In African culture, counseling has for one reason or another not grounded itself. It is taken with suspicion. When someone goes for counseling, people think he or she is mad and that is why the psychiatric ward in most hospitals is the most unpopular section of the

hospital. It is believed that anyone who goes there is mad and has been bewitched and no counseling procedures can assist in the recovery to sanity. Unless this view, is removed through education, the professionalization of counseling services will be difficult.

One of the stumbling blocks in the professionalization of counseling in Africa is the competition it faces against religious counseling. African communities are extremely religious. Some believe in traditional religious, while many others are Christians and also moslems. In the Christian religion, every pastor or Christian culture should believe the following:

- That God is the source of all truth and wisdom needed in counseling.
- The pastor is dependent on God, the Holy Spirit as his/her counselor for guidance, wisdom, discernment and directions.
- God's word contains all the truth and wisdom which is needed by the pastor as counselor
- Counseling is seeking to reach the right conclusion and solution according to God's perspective

Many African people, especially among the shone people would rather go to see their pastor, rather than visiting a professional counselor. This kind of a scenario operates against the professionalization of counseling in Africa.

The visibility of professional counselors in Africa is very limited, if not non existent in most African countries. In Zimbabwe, for example, counseling is incorporated in hospitals, but does not stand on its own as a private practice, and this also provides another dimension why professional counselling is facing many challenges. In Zimbabwe, the public services commission is even refusing to recognize counseling degrees in schools, despite the fact that it is mandatory to provide guidance and counseling in both primary and secondary schools. This kind of attitudes and negative perceptions by some government boards also work against the professionalization of counseling in Africa.

Professional counselling in Africa is relatively new in the case of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Open University is the only university offering counselling as a degree programme and is one of the few handful education centres which offer counselling as a programme of study. Other education centres only offer counselling as one of the courses offered in various social sciences oriented programmes of study. Thus African

industries are still to create vacancies for the counselling graduates hence counselling as a professional practice is still to make its mark.

The other major challenge facing professional counselling in Africa emanates from the circumstances surrounding the launch of counselling programmes. In Zimbabwe for instance professional counselling appears to have been launched with very little stakeholder buy in hence the resistance and lukewarm response to the assimilation of counselling professionals in industry.

### **Possible Solutions to Addressing the Challenges Confronting Professional Counselling in Africa**

- ✚ There is need for professionally trained counsellors, institutions which offer counselling programmes and counselling educationists to establish vibrant counselling associations which accredit counselling graduates as professional counsellors.
- ✚ Professional counselling bodies in various African countries should come together and form regional consortiums that govern regional counselling practices to ensure uniform standards of professional practice across the continent.
- ✚ Various counselling stakeholders such as professionally trained counsellors, institutions which offer counselling programmes and counselling educationists should make concerted efforts to lobby governments, employers such as the public service commission and the private sector to recognise professional counselling and recruit counselling graduates.
- ✚ Counselling stakeholders should market vigorously counselling as a professional discipline and in addition counselling associations should strive be affiliated to international counselling associations and be active members of such associations.
- ✚ Counsellor education programmes in Africa are at times too generalized and lacking in focus in terms of specialization; it is a known fact that counselling is a very wide field (Aluede et al, 2005). In spite of the diverse field of counselling, all aspects are lumped together in the process of training counsellors. Today, in the US, one can earn specialized degrees like Masters in School Counselling, Masters in Mental Health Counselling, and Masters in Rehabilitation Counselling and so on. Counselling Bodies should narrow their focus to specific counselling fields to give professional counselling industrial appeal

thereby enhancing professional counselling in Africa.

- ✚ Counselling bodies should host international conferences and workshops to ensure that their members are kept abreast of the new trends since counselling is a highly dynamic discipline and that members share experiences and best practices thereby deepening professional counselling in Africa.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Counselling as a profession in Africa is destined for an enviable status. What is only required is that counselling stakeholders such as professionally trained counsellors, institutions which offer counselling programmes and counselling educationists get their acts together to establish vibrant counselling bodies. Ultimately counselling bodies must form fruitful partnerships in order to market professional at a continental level so that counselling is recognized for the unique contribution it makes to an individual's total well being and the potential role it may play in industry. Through licensure, certification, continuing education and more importantly, pressuring for the recognition of counselling as an important professional practice, professional counselling bodies in Africa would be able to provide professional identity to counselling in the continent. This would go a long way in facilitating the growth of professional counselling in Africa.

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