

Professional identity, current status, and prospects of counselling psychology in Nigeria

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Introduction

There are two uses to which psychology can be deployed to solve the many problems of living. These are non-profession-specific use and profession-specific use. The non-profession-specific use refers to the contributions of most psychology graduates who do not usually go beyond the bachelor's degree program. A bachelor's degree in psychology offers graduates the first taste of training in the concepts, principles, and methodology of psychology, but the professional touch of the discipline is not guaranteed at this level. Bachelor's degree graduates of psychology can go into general fields of endeavours as do other graduates of many other disciplines. Many jobs today involve basic understanding of people, and because psychology is a useful means for pursuing that understanding, many graduates of psychology can work in several settings. The profession-specific use on the other hand, refers to the contributions of professional psychologists who must obtain higher degrees in various areas of specialization in psychology. Graduate training in psychology prepares students to have full psychological expertise and competence for careers in professional psychology. The seeming dichotomy between non-profession-specific use and profession-specific use of psychological knowledge demonstrates that a bachelor's degree in psychology is limited to qualify one to

become a psychologist. Who then is a psychologist? The Nigerian Psychological Association (NPA) describes a psychologist as someone who has completed at least a master's degree in any area of psychology from a recognized university (NPA, 1984). Therefore, students who wish to consider careers in psychology, especially counselling psychology, should complete graduate training in psychology (at least a master's degree) to qualify as professional psychologists. It must be pointed out that the number of graduates of psychology who proceed to Graduate School to specialize at the Master's level or beyond is less than a quarter of all the graduates at the bachelor level.

The most notable trend about psychology in Nigeria today is specialization. Most psychology departments in Nigerian universities today are organized along areas of specialization. Psychologists in Nigeria may be counselling psychologists, clinical psychologists, experimental psychologists, developmental psychologists (just to mention a few). Specialization in Nigerian psychology did not begin when psychology was established in Nigeria's tertiary education; instead, it started about a decade later. Specialization of Nigerian psychology began in the early 1970s, when many Nigerian psychologists who had earned higher degrees in psychology from overseas universities returned back to the country. Many of those returnee professional psychologists took up employment as lecturers in the departments of psychology across the country and started to nurture younger psychologists in their special areas of interest (Mefoh, 2014a). It was those early psychologists that laid the foundation for the growth, development, and expansion of both the discipline and specialties in Nigerian psychology.

The counselling psychology specialty was an exception though. The specialty is relatively young in Nigerian psychology. Although departments of psychology across Nigeria offer 'introduction to counselling psychology' as an undergraduate course, there was no graduate training in counselling psychology until 1994. In July 1994, the Senate of the

University of Nigeria, Nsukka, after it had considered reports of the Postgraduate Board of the department of psychology and the Curriculum Committee of the School of Postgraduate Studies, approved that the department of psychology in the university should commence postgraduate training in Counselling Psychology. Thus, the professionalization of counselling psychology in Nigeria occurred much recently after many other specializations have taken roots in the country.

Counselling Psychology and Clinical Psychology Tie: Professional Identity or Diffusion

Counselling psychology is a specialty that maintains a focus on facilitating personal and interpersonal functioning across the lifespan. The goal of counselling psychology is to provide people with coping skills. In other words, counselling psychologists help their clients to actualize their potentials and to develop their coping strategies and interpersonal skills. They use a variety of strategies to help people manage behavioural issues, cope with stress, alleviate anxiety and distress, and deal with issues associated with psychological disorders. This group of psychologists pays particular attention to emotional, social, vocational, educational, health-related, developmental and organizational concerns. There is a bit of overlap between counselling psychology and clinical psychology. For example, both work with disturbed persons and see people with a wide range of psychological disturbances. However, the counselling psychologist typically deals with less serious problem cases than a clinical psychologist, who often focuses on diagnosable mental disorders (or psychopathology).

The relationship between the counselling and the clinical specialty is usually characterized by mutual respect in most countries of the world, such as Australia, United States, and even South Africa. But in Nigeria, there seem to be a kind of emasculation going on. When you '*emasculate*' something or someone, you take away its strength. For most part of its existence in Nigerian psychology, counselling psychology seems to exist as an appendage of clinical psychology. It has been pointed out that the clinical psychology specialty is the largest

single group of psychologists in Nigeria (Gire, 2003; Mefoh, 2014a). The clinical psychology specialty seems to use its large size to exploit and dominate other specialties in Nigerian psychology, especially counselling psychology, which it has close ties with. Clinical psychologists can fully train and supervise counselling psychology students. The clinical psychology specialty inadvertently carries on as if clinical psychology and counselling psychology are one and the same specialty; but that is only hypocrisy. The view was only concocted to allow her to continue to dominate counselling psychology. This erroneous notion that seems to be pervading many universities in Nigeria today is a false narrative, which the Association of Counselling Psychologists in Nigeria (ACPIN) must stand bold to counter.

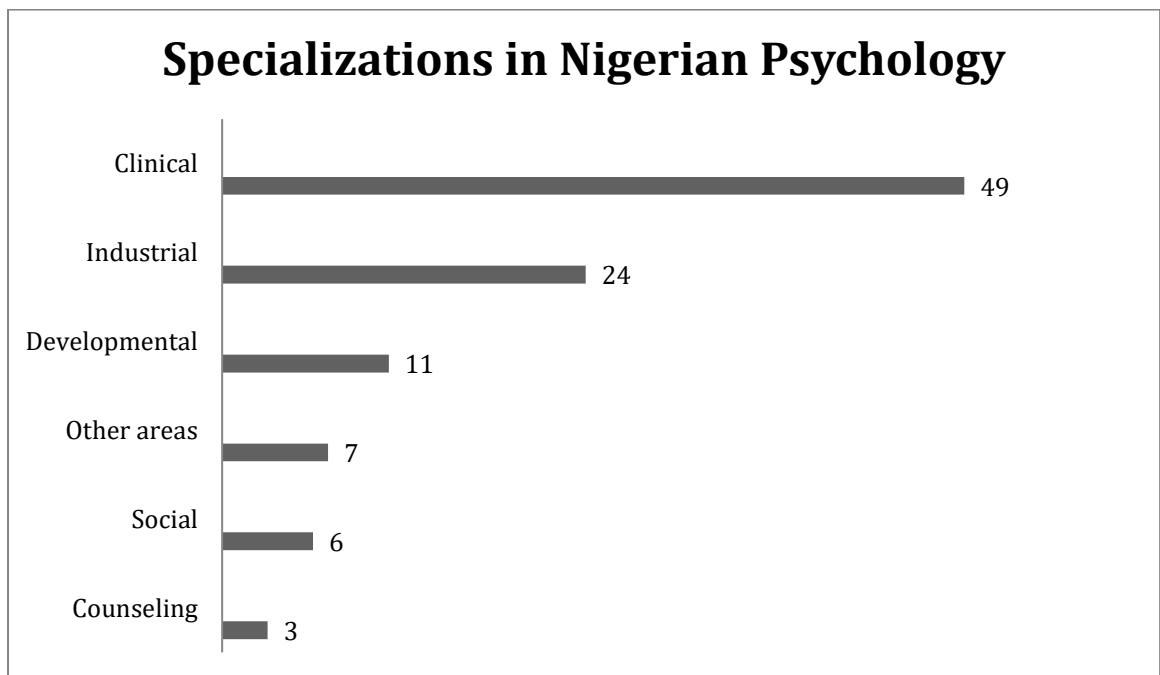


Figure 1: Showing the size (in percent %) of various specializations in Nigerian Psychology

It is indeed very true that counselling psychology and clinical psychology share many commonalities. But truth be told, they also have many differences that set them apart. Table 1 shows some of the differences between the counselling psychology and clinical psychology specialties. If clinical psychologists in Nigeria believe that both counselling psychology and clinical psychology are the same, why is it only clinical psychology that train counselling psychology students? Should a counselling psychologist train a clinical psychology student?

Never, that would be considered an aberration and the Clinical Division (i.e., Nigerian Association of Clinical Psychologists (NACP) would not allow it. If counselling and clinical psychology are the same as they claim, why not allow counselling psychologists to also train and supervise clinical psychology students? This paper therefore enjoins the Counselling Division to wake up and to begin to assert its right as a full-fledged specialty of psychology in Nigeria. The training of counselling psychology students by clinical psychologists in the past may have been expedient at the time due to the acute dearth of qualified counselling psychologists in Nigeria. But with the establishment of the Counselling Division (i.e., Association of Counselling Psychologists in Nigeria (ACPIN) in 2016, counselling psychology is not young anymore. It is therefore the responsibility of the Division to maintain quality assurance in the sub-discipline. Failure to do so would malign the professional identity of counselling psychology as a serious stand-alone specialty in Nigeria.

The objective of this discourse is not to blithely encourage professional discord between counselling psychology and clinical psychology in Nigeria. Rather, the goal is to raise the consciousness of counselling psychologists to brace up and assert that the counselling psychology specialty is relevant to nation building. The professional identity of the specialty must not hang on another to be recognized and be counted. The Counselling Division has a serious role to play to guard her professional identity. Failure to assert its relevance would lead to identity diffusion, which is a lack of commitment to develop a path for the future, including occupational and ideological paths. Identity diffusion is one of the four statuses defined by Marcia (1980), who examined the formation of identity in terms of two dimensions: (i) whether the individual has gone through a decision-making period, referred to as crisis, and (ii) whether the individual has committed to particular occupational choices or ideological beliefs. Marcia's focus on occupation and ideology, specifically, arose from Erikson's proposal that one's occupation and one's commitment to particular values and beliefs are the fundamental parts of

identity. Thus, to chart a clear career path, psychology counselors through the Counselling Division of the Nigerian Psychological Association (NPA) should commit to meaningful goals or values and establish a future direction. The counselling specialty needs to resolve her professional identity crises by preserving the standard and professional integrity of counselling psychologists in Nigeria.

Table 1: Differences between Counselling Psychology and Clinical Psychology

<i>Basics for comparison</i>	<i>Counselling psychology</i>	<i>Clinical psychology</i>
Areas of focus	Counselling psychology focus on facilitating personal and interpersonal functioning across the lifespan. Because counselling psychology can target a range of people and problems, students typically find an area of specialty, such as marriage and family, or develop a cultural competency, such as with gender and sexuality.	Clinical psychology broadly centers on mental illness that range from major depressive disorders to schizophrenia. Clinical psychologists treat primarily by instilling resilience in the people they meet with.
The work they do	Counselling psychologists tends to work with healthier patients (i.e., psychologically stable individuals) who have less severe psychological problems. Their work focuses more on emotional, social and physical issues associated with school, work or family settings (Norcross, 2000).	Clinical psychologists work with broad range of psychopathology and clinical diagnosis; they also receive more extensive clinical training with serious psychopathology, including bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and major depressive disorders, among others (Morgan & Cohen, 2008).
Place of employment	Counselling psychologists are frequently employed in university counselling centers, mental health centers, and rehabilitation centers. Counselling psychologists can also have private practice.	Clinical psychologists work in a variety of settings, such as, but not limited to universities, community mental health centers, private practice, hospitals, inpatient settings, primary care settings, and academic medical centers
Their orientations of theory	Counselling psychologists frequently prefer to use client-centered and humanistic approaches.	Clinical psychologists prefer to use psychoanalytic and behavioural-cognitive therapy approaches.

Education and Training

Any student wishing to make a career in counselling psychology must enroll for graduate training in the sub-field after undergraduate studies. The most basic requirement for admission into a graduate program in counselling psychology (as in all other areas of psychology) in most Nigeria universities is a bachelor's degree in psychology. There might be some slight variations in some universities with regards to this requirement. For candidates seeking admission into the Master's degree program in counselling psychology at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for instance, they are required to be graduates of the university or other recognized universities. The candidate must have obtained a bachelor's degree at the level of Second Class (Lower Division) or a minimum of cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 2.50 on a 5-point scale. Graduates of psychology with a Third Class degree are not considered for the Master's degree program. Rather, they are advised to enroll in the one-year postgraduate diploma (PGD) program to further broaden their foundation in the concepts, principles, and methods of psychology.

Graduate training in counselling psychology is built on the felt need to provide students with advanced knowledge and skills to help people improve their well-being and alleviate distress and maladjustment. Students majoring in the field are trained to help people resolve crises, and increase their ability to function better in their lives. Table 2 shows the range of postgraduate courses offered in counselling psychology at both the M.Sc and Ph.D. levels in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The information is obtained from the postgraduate program Handbook of the department of psychology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Students enrolled in the M.Sc program in counselling psychology are required to take a minimum of 36 credit hours in the following specifications: coursework – 21 units, research project – 6 units, seminar – 3 units, and internship – 3 units. The coursework includes a faculty course on ICT and advanced research methodology (3 units). All master's students are expected to pass the faculty course, which include a workshop to be organized by the School of Postgraduate Studies, and

with a certificate of participation without which the result is incomplete. The master's student must do all the prescribed number of core and required courses for the program. The student must also undertake a supervised internship at a relevant site, and must carry out an original dissertation (i.e., research project) at the end of the training. The research project would finally be defended by the student through a Viva. The duration of a full-time master's degree program in counselling psychology is between a minimum of four semesters and a maximum of five semesters, while the duration for a part-time program is between a minimum of five semesters and a maximum of eight semesters.

Table 2: Core and Compulsory Courses for M.Sc. and Ph.D. in Counselling Psychology at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka

M.Sc. Program			Ph.D. Program		
Course No	Course Title	Units	Course No	Course Title	Units
PGC 601	ICT and Advanced Research Methodology (Faculty course)	3	PGC 701	Synopsis and Grant Writing (Faculty course)	3
PSY 601	Theories, Controversies and Paradigms in the Schools of Psychology	3	PSY 702	Theoretical synthesis and Meta-Analysis in Psychology	3
PSY 602	Psychology of Entrepreneurship and Internship	3	PSY 703	Statistics and Computer Analysis in Psychology	3
PSY 603	Advanced Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology	3	PSY 771	Foundations of Counselling Psychology	3
PSY 605	Research Methodology and Application of ICT in Research	3	PSY 772	Individual and Group Counselling	3
PSY 671	Counselling Theory and Practice	3	PSY 773	Emerging Issues in Counselling Psychology	3
PSy 672	Therapeutic Skills and Counselling	3	PSY 787	Internship in Counselling Psychology	3
PSY 673	Assessment, Construction, Use, and Interpretation of Tests	3	PSY 791 (a)	Seminar 1	3
PSY 687	Internship in Counselling Psychology	3	PSY 791 (b)	Seminar 2	3
PSY 691	Seminar	3	PSY 792	Research Project	12
PSY 692	Research Project	6			

Candidates applying for the Ph.D. degree program in counselling psychology at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, must have master's degree in counselling psychology with a

minimum of a CGPA of not less than 4.00/5.00 points. The minimum and maximum duration of program for Ph.D. in counselling psychology are as follow: full-time is between a minimum of eight semesters and a maximum of twelve semesters, while part-time is between a minimum of ten semesters and a maximum of fourteen semesters. The mode of study for the Ph.D. degree in counselling psychology is by coursework and extensive research work. Doctoral students are required to present two seminars of 6 credit hours other than thesis, which has 12 credit hours. The Ph.D. thesis must be defended before an External Examiner (i.e., through a Viva) duly nominated for that purpose and appointed by Senate. All doctoral coursework should include book and/or journal article review. To be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in counselling psychology, the student must take and pass all the prescribed number of core and required courses, including the faculty course on synopsis and grant writing (3 credit hour). Every doctoral student is expected to pass the faculty course – *synopsis and grant writing* before graduation. The course is designed to lead to extension of network of research collaboration and mentorship.

Counselling psychology and national development

It has become almost standard practice for disciplines to periodically assess or evaluate their contributions to national development (Louw, 2002). The term ‘national development’ is a multifaceted concept that does not lend itself to a precise definition. The idea of national development among the human sciences, such as psychology, relates to growth in major dimensions of human development. Succinctly described, “the human person should be the main focus of development, and the sustainable, continuous enrichment of the human condition should be its major goal” (Obanya, 2003; p. 21). This focus on the human person in national development is known as human development index (HDI), which places emphasis on individuals – or, more precisely, on their opportunities to realize satisfying work and lives. The HDI is a measure of average achievements in key dimensions of human development, such as

a long and healthy life, quality of education, and a decent standard of living. Specifically, the human development index (HDI) measures average achievement in these three basic dimensions of human development: (i) long and healthy life – the measurement is done with the average life expectancy; (ii) knowledge – the measurement is done with literacy rate and the percentage of the registrations to primary and secondary schools and universities; and (iii) decent standard of living –the measurement is done with per capita income and the calculation of the purchasing power in United States dollar.

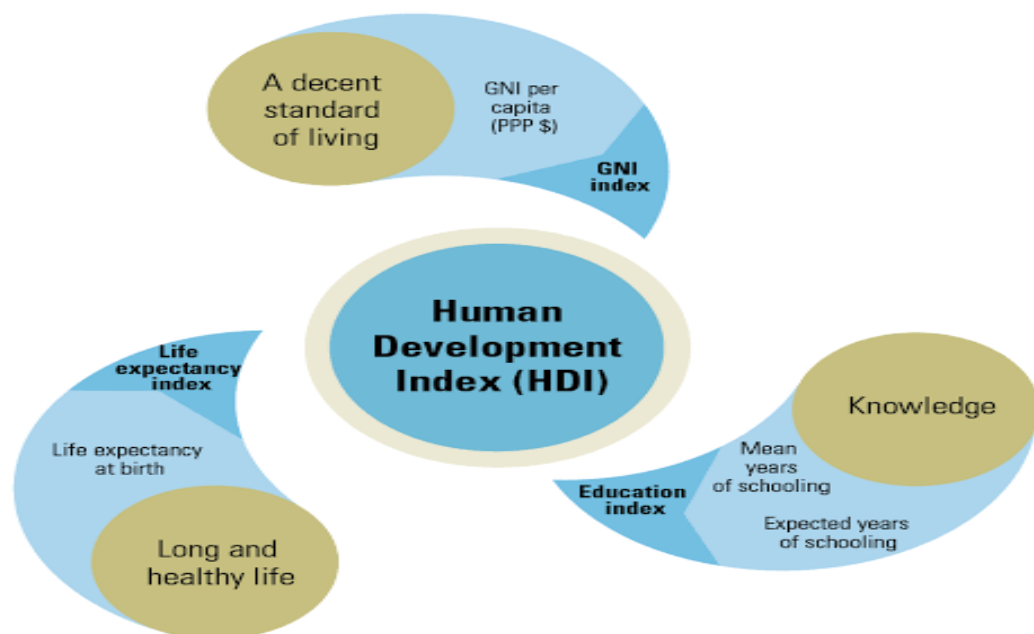


Figure 2: Components of the Dynamics of Human Development Index (HDI)

It is good that the theme of ACPIN’s 2022 Conference is on “Security and economic crises in Nigeria: Counselling for improved mental health”. In a traumatized society like Nigeria, how do psychology counselors contribute to better living in the society? In the face of incessant security and economic crises in Nigeria, measures of human development index (HDI) that incorporate human measures such as a long and healthy life, quality of education, and of standard of living are at all-time low level. In fact, the present-day Nigeria presents many of the characteristics of a society at war. Within the last seven years, more Nigerians

have probably lost their lives to the senseless killings around the country than to motor accidents and infectious diseases put together. The Boko Haram alone has caused monumental havoc to the people of north-east, Nigeria. The group had killed about 350,000 people, abducted over 4,000 people and had displaced about 1.7 million people since the start of the conflict in 2009 (Dudley, 2019). In other parts of the country, thousands of innocent people have also lost their lives to banditry, kidnappings, farmers-herders conflict and other violent crimes, such as the inglorious unknown gunmen (UGM) in the south-east, Nigeria. All these security challenges have spawned humanitarian crises, which may vary from what looks mild such as feelings of fear, anger and hatred to severe forms like trauma and other forms of mental health problems. The many stresses of living in the present-day Nigeria require a lot of psychological first aid, and the counselling psychology specialty is the subfield of psychology that is best suited to help the populace cope with their troubled lives.

So, how are counselling psychologists in Nigeria responding to the several security challenges? In the past, a few non-counselling psychologists did utilize intervention skills based on the principles of counselling psychology to help alleviate difficulties of people living in conflict areas around the Mambila Plateau of North-east, Nigeria (Ojiji, 2011). Similar procedure was adopted to solve the Ife-Modakeke conflict in South-west, Nigeria (Olowo, cited in Mefoh, 2014a). However, despite these efforts, the specific-profession contributions of counselling psychologists to national development can best be described as low and insignificant. In short, looking at the gamut of societal problems facing the Nigerian people, one can say that counselling psychologists have not even started to scratch the surface of problem.

The poor impact of counselling psychology interventions to national development can be attributed to two related factors. The first factor is the number of counselling psychologists in Nigeria. The ratio of professional psychologists to Nigerian population is grossly low. Gire

(2003) puts the figure to about 58 psychologists per 100,000 citizens, while Mefoh (2014b) estimated even a smaller ratio of 50 psychologists to 150,000 citizens or about 1:3000 (i.e., one psychologist to about three thousand people). These estimates are undoubtedly small in a country with an estimated population of about 200 million people. With the counselling psychology specialty being one of the subfields in Nigerian psychology with the least number of trained personnel, the efforts of the few trained and available counselling psychologists are like a drop in the ocean. Given the small number of counselling psychologists and the fact that counselling psychology is yet to establish a foothold as a viable profession in Nigeria, the visibility and impact of counselling psychologists are significantly minimized.

Another factor that contributes to the current low status of counselling psychology in Nigeria is that the sub-field largely operates in Nigeria as more or less, a classroom research enterprise. Akin-Ogundeji (1991) lamented that psychology in Nigeria was largely a classroom research enterprise with little practical relevance “to problems of living in contemporary Nigerian society” (p.3). This statement is still very true of the counselling psychology specialty. Most qualified counselling psychologists in Nigeria are employed to teach in the departments of psychology across the country. In other words, only few counselling psychologists’ (less than 5%) offer psychological services to the public. Many of those counselling psychologists frequently do so on part-time basis (or at their spare time) because they hold employments in the universities or in the hospitals.

Challenges and Prospects

The most significant challenge facing psychology in Nigeria today, including the counselling psychology specialty is the failure of the Nigerian Psychological Association (NPA) to secure the status of a chartered organization. It should be recalled that the National Assembly in 2019, passed the psychology bill (SB 624), which sought to establish the Nigerian council for psychologists and other related matters. In specific terms, by the 9th of May, 2019,

the psychology bill had passed all the stages in the two chambers of the National Assembly, and the bill was transmitted to President Muhammadu Buhari and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces for presidential assent. Unfortunately, the President withheld his assent up till the expiration of the 8th National Assembly. The implication of the President's refusal to assent the Nigerian council for psychologists and other related matters bill is that the bill did not become a law. Thus, the Nigerian Psychological Association (NPA) failed to be conferred the status of a Charter, which it rightly desired. What does it mean to attain a chartered status? It simply means that an organization with the status of a charter can have legal powers to maintain quality assurance in the training and practice of that profession. Makanju (2017) argues that a Charter status to the NPA would empower the Association, under the law, to regulate the development and approval of curriculum, as well as practice of professional psychology in Nigeria. In other words, as long as the psychology bill is not legitimized, the best the NPA or her Divisions can do is to continue in advocacy and appeal to the conscience of stakeholders to be ethical and to apply due diligence in dispensing psychological services to the solutions of Nigeria's multifarious problems. The NPA for example, would have no power, under the law, to control unscrupulous elements who capitalize on the fears, hopes and aspirations of gullible people to dispense 'pseudo-psychological services.' It must be pointed out that a new effort has been put in motion by NPA to pressurize the 9th National Assembly to do the needful soonest, so that the President can do what is right before he leaves office in May 2023.

Despite this challenge, there is great hope that the prospects of psychology in Nigeria are very bright. Two reasons are shared in this paper as the basis for this optimism. The first is hinged on the scheme of service for psychologists. In past years, there was no hierarchy and identifiable path for upward mobility to which professional psychologists can aspire in the civil or public service. Psychologists employed in the service were simply employed to fill general

duty positions. Dissatisfied with the situation, the Nigerian Psychological Association mounted advocacy and mobilized critical stakeholders towards review of the conditions of service for Nigerian professional psychologists. Today, psychologists have a new career structure. Professional psychologists now have clear job directions and specifications: from psychologist II to psychologist I, then to senior psychologist, and finally to the Director of psychological services. This scheme of service now leads to improved motivation for professional psychologists - counselling psychologists, clinical psychologists, industrial/organizational psychologists, etc. Because professional psychologists are the psychologists that usually take psychology closest to the people, the approval of the career structure for Nigerian psychologists by the Federal Ministry of Establishment is a welcome development and would positively influence more psychologists to go into the public service.

Psychology in Nigeria had suffered many misconceptions, and Olomolaiye (1985) implored Nigerian psychologists to tell Nigerians what psychology is and what psychologists do. Recent feedbacks on the public perceptions of psychology in Nigeria demonstrate that Olomolaiye's clarion call had yielded positive fruits. Results of a national survey (Abikoye *et al.*, In Press), showed that respondents generally value psychology. The national survey specifically showed that about 85% of the respondent perceived psychology to be a scientific discipline, 62% agreed that psychologists are needed in Nigeria, and 76% agreed that psychologists can contribute to national development. Majority of the respondents perceived counselling psychologists as most suitably qualified in solving marital conflicts, ethnic distrust, attitudinal problems, pathological gambling, emotional problems, cigarette smoking, and addiction problems. These findings indicate that the Nigerian public appears to have accepted and recognized psychology as a means to provide solutions to the problems of living. The level of acceptance of any discipline determines whether potential clients would come to them or go somewhere else for help. The public acceptance of psychology foretells what the future holds

for professional psychology: a large base of potential clients would seek psychological services in the future, instead of seeking the services of religious prophets or people considered to possess trado-occultic powers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper had three goals: the first was to raise the consciousness of the members of Association of Counselling Psychologists in Nigeria (ACPIN) to protect the professional identity of the specialty in Nigerian psychology. The second was to evaluate the current status of counselling psychologists in Nigeria by assessing their contributions to national development; and lastly, to examine the challenges and prospects of counselling psychology in Nigeria.

Although Association of Counselling Psychologists in Nigeria (ACPIN) is still a young specialty in Nigerian psychology, time has come for the Division to brace up and protect its professional identity. As the specialty expands due to the needs of the society to solve multifarious problems of living, ACPIN must ensure that the professional identity of counselling psychology is well delineated and protected. The ACPIN must do proper house-keeping to ensure that psychology counselors demonstrate knowledge and skill about their work. The second concern observed that the current status of counselling psychologists in nation building is relatively low. Two factors were implicated to contribute to this low impact. The first is that counselling psychologists are too few in number and the efforts of the few psychologists are like a drop in the ocean. The other is that most qualified counselling psychologists teach in the universities, and fail to take psychological services to the people needing them.

In terms of the challenge, one notable problem confronting counselling psychologists, indeed all psychologists in Nigeria, is the failure of the Nigerian Psychological Association (NPA) to successfully push for the establishment of the Nigerian council for psychologists and

other related matters bill (i.e., Psychology bill (SB 624). Without the bill, the Nigerian Psychological Association (NPA) and her divisions would only rely on appeal and advocacy to protect psychology and psychologists. They would have no power under the law to interfere with the activities of unscrupulous elements that practice quackery for psychological services.

Despite the above challenge, the future looks bright for psychologists in Nigeria, especially for counselling psychologists. This optimistic view is based on two factors. First is the recent approval of the scheme of service for psychologists, which guarantees career growth. This development would likely lead to motivation and job satisfaction for professional psychologists. Another relevant factor that points to future prospect of the discipline is the positive testimonies and the general acceptance of psychology by the Nigerian populace. These positive responses suggest that professional psychologists would have a large base of potential clients in the future.

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