Coping With the Counselling Job in the Nigerian School System: 
A Case of Mobilisation of Cognitive Dissonance Dimensions

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Abstract
This is a theoretical paper that ex-rayed the precarious state of the counsellor and counselling in Nigeria. The Nigerian counsellor is compelled to engage in roles that are diametrically opposed to each other. Rendering counselling service and membership of the School Disciplinary Committee, for example, are antithetical as the counsellor cannot be humanizing and punishing concurrently. In order to redress these unsatisfactory job conditions of the counsellor, he/she needs the psychological buffer provided by cognitive dissonance dimensions. Dimensions that could be mobilised by the counsellor in order to restore cognitive equilibrium, as enunciated in the work are psychological tension, motivation to reduce tension, level of reward accruing from the behaviour, forced compliance and phoney. The import of this paper is brought to the fore in that although the physical and psychological environment may not motivate the counsellor to self-actualization the counsellor cannot afford to betray confidence reposed in him by the numerous clients that are beneficiaries of guidance services in the school system.

Keywords: coping; counselling; Nigeria; school; cognitive; dissonance.

INTRODUCTION
The disenchantment with the colonial curriculum, as inherited at independence, motivated the Federal Government of Nigeria to convey a conference of all stakeholders in the education enterprise in 1969. The outcome of the conference was the emergence of the national policy on education in 1977 later revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004. Having carefully studied the loopholes in the previous education system, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the national policy on education, brought some innovations to the teaching process. One of the innovations contained in the policy was the formalisation of guidance services. This service aims at catering for the adjustment needs of the learner. Thus, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004:53) states:

In view of the apparent ignorance of many young people about career prospects and in view of personality maladjustment among school children, career officers and counsellors shall be appointed in post-primary and primary institutions. Since qualified personnel in this category are scarce, government shall continue to make provisions for the training of interested teachers in guidance and counselling. Guidance and counselling shall also feature in teacher education programmes. Proprietors of schools shall provide guidance counsellors in adequate number in each primary and post-primary school. With the formalisation of guidance services in school, government hoped to produce holistic school learners who would acquire education in the normative rather than in the descriptive sense. Government recognised and stressed the need for counselling to assume a prominent position in the teacher education programme. Thus, provision was made for the training of interested teachers who would like to become counsellors who would render counselling, appraisal, information, placement, referral and follow-up and evaluation services to the school system (Egbule, 2002).

There is no gainsaying the fact that for the counsellor to translate personal and professional qualities to rendering the aforementioned services effectively, a conducive environment needs to be provided by stakeholders in the school community. The counsellor needs the support of the principal, teachers, students, parents as well as the officials of ministry of education and the post primary education board to be able to operate confidently and freely. Commenting on obstacles encountered by counsellors in the performance of guidance duties, Alutu (2005:123) has this to say of Edo state:

Principals do not co-operate with counsellors and some keep away relevant information from them; funds to run counselling programmes are hardly provided; general lack of understanding of the need for counselling by principals, teachers and students; no provision for counselling on the school time table in almost all the schools; …counsellors are saddled with teaching assignment and other general administrative duties instead of spending time on issues concerning individuals or group of students.
A counsellor could be hard-working but because of environmental constraints he may not be able to utilise the resources in the repertoire. This results in the counsellor being labelled as incompetent. This invariably creates an unpleasant state of tension, otherwise known as cognitive dissonance. Cognitive refers to mental awareness while dissonance means disharmony. In the context of the counsellor’s job (the school), cognitive dissonance is perceptible when the psychological and social variables within the organisational climate are antagonistic to the course of success of the counsellor on the job. It is a drive or feeling of discomfort caused by holding two or more inconsistent cognitions. Thus, cognitive dissonance is a psychological term which describes the uncomfortable tension that may come from having conflicting thoughts at the same time, or from engaging in behaviour that conflicts with one’s beliefs.

Hence, Idowu & Esere (2007) state that “cognitive dissonance is the psychological conflict arising from holding two or more incompatible beliefs simultaneously.” On his part, Kolo (2006:15) says “dissonance is a state of psychological discomfort that is aroused when an event occurs which disconfirms any strong expectation”. As noted by Alutu (2005) counsellors in secondary schools in Edo state are made to teach rather than practice counselling for which they were trained. This is role-conflict and counsellors, like other professionals, compare their professional expectations with their current job outcomes.

Thus, discrepancy in these expectations creates dissonance or conflict in the counsellor which threatens the psychological well-being or state of the worker (Abraham 1999). In a nutshell, it is a condition of conflict or anxiety resulting from inconsistency between one’s beliefs and actions such as opposing the slaughter of animals and eating meat. In the simplest explanation, cognitive dissonance is having two different and contradicting beliefs in an individual’s brain at the same time. Operationally, therefore, cognitive dissonance is seen as the psychological tension experienced by the guidance counsellor as sequel to the realisation that he or she is being made to perform roles for which the counsellor did not train or carrying out activities that are diametrically opposed to the ethical code or the belief of the counsellor in the school system.

Cognitive dissonance is expressed from the following dimensions. Firstly, psychological tension, which is the mental anguish suffered by the individual as sequel to the awareness that the person has behaved stupidly, unethically, immorally, illegally or unconventionally. This distressing mental state occurs when people do things they would not want to do, or express opinions that are contrary to opinions they are holding. This, naturally, leads to the second dimension of this construct which is the motivation to reduce the tension. Reduction of psychological tension is accomplished through cognitive restructuring by changing the way we think about the world as well as the way we behave. People who are dissonant could adopt any of the following strategies to mitigate the psychological tension. Firstly, people change their attitude in order to synchronise their attitude and behaviour with the issue at hand. A second strategy of this phenomenon is that the dissonant person could add more cognition. Here, for instance, are two discrepant thoughts that cause dissonance, “I like smoking but it can lead to cancer of the lungs”. The person could add the following cognitions in order to reduce dissonance: “smoking relaxes me and keeps my weight down, which benefits my health” (Franzoi, 2000:172). Thirdly, the dissonant person can alter the importance by stating as follows: “it is more to stay relaxed and slim than to worry about may be getting cancer thirty years from now” (Franzoi, 2000:172). Fourthly, a dissonant person could rationalise that there is little or no choice than to engage in the discrepant behaviour. Finally, the dissonant person could trivialise the importance of the event that culminated in the dissonance (Franzoi, 2000:172).

A third dimension to cognitive dissonance is level of reward accruing from the behaviour. The higher the level of reward accruing to individuals who engage in unethical behaviour the less the degree of dissonance (Franzoi, 2000). Proponents of this approach posit that people who are highly rewarded for their action(s) have sufficient justification for the counter attitudinal behaviour and as such never experience dissonance. Conversely, people who are less rewarded have insufficient justification to engage in the counter attitudinal behaviour and hence they experience dissonance. Thus, the weaker the reasons for acting inconsistently with one’s attitudes, beliefs or conviction, the greater the mental anguish experienced by the individual and the greater the motivation to reduce the tension by changing the attitude in question.

The fourth dimension to cognitive dissonance is forced compliance. This occurs, when an individual acts, behaves or expresses an opinion in a way or manner that is dissonant to what the individual would have loved to do or what the person believes because various circumstances are compelling the person to comply. Such circumstances include the nature of the person’s job, the need to demonstrate loyalty to one’s boss, or fear of being sanctioned or sacked from the job. Thus, for fear of being blackmailed by the principal, the counsellor could be compelled to carry
a full teaching load to the detriment of counselling which is the primary responsibility.

The last dimension of note in cognitive dissonance is phoney, in which people exhibit pretentious behaviour, de-emphasising the import of genuine and authentic behaviour. Many at times, people rationalise their actions, attributing their behaviour to institutional demands, or the demand of the job. In order to mitigate the psychological tension provoked by their actions they employ the weapon of rationalisation with such a statement as “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” or what is further expressed in local parlance as “if you cannot beat them you join them”. In Nigeria, the unemployment situation may seem to be compelling the counsellor to behave inauthentically by accepting responsibilities such as membership of the disciplinary committee for the simple reason of protecting the only means of livelihood and ignoring the negative impact of the membership on student’s patronage of guidance services.

From the foregoing, if counsellors are compelled to take on roles such as full teaching load, as practised in states like Anambra, Imo, Abia, Delta and Ebonyi (Okonkwo, 2005); and Edo (Alutu, 2005); appointed to membership of disciplinary committee (Okonkwo, 2005) and even as vice principals or principals (Okonkwo, 2005). It is a clear case of role conflict. The implication of the above identified conflict is that the counsellor cannot effectively perform the guidance services for which he/she has been trained.

The aforementioned dimensions of cognitive dissonance clearly indicate that counsellors in Nigeria are not shielded from the onslaught of this psychological phenomenon. The dimensions also indicate that dissonance occurs when counsellors’ activities conform to organisational norms but run contrary to the counsellor’s beliefs and professional training. Similarly, the dimensions of dissonance discussed above paint picture of anguish rather than pleasure in the mind of the counsellor. It becomes imperative, therefore, for one to question how satisfied the counsellor has been with his/her counselling job in Nigeria. For example, a counsellor who is supposed to inculcate positive values in students could be compelled by the school authorities to be involved in examination malpractice during external examinations. The realisation by the counsellor that he is performing a role that is at variance with what he believes or role expectation provokes an emotional pain in the counsellor.

Reduction of psychological tension is accomplished through cognitive restructuring by changing the way we think about the world as well as the way we behave. People who are dissonant could adopt any of the following strategies to mitigate the psychological tension they experience. Firstly, people change their attitude in order to synchronise their attitude and behaviour with the issue at hand. A second strategy identified by Franzoi (2000) is that dissonant person could add more cognition. Here, for instance, are two discrepant thoughts that cause dissonance, “I like smoking but it can lead to cancer of the lungs”. The person could add the following cognitions in order to reduce dissonance: “smoking relaxes me and keeps my weight down, which benefits my health” (Franzoi, 2000:172). Thirdly, the dissonant person can alter the importance by stating as follows: “it is more to stay relaxed and slim down than to worry about may be getting cancer thirty years from now” (Franzoi, 2000:172). Fourthly, a dissonant person could reduce the perceived choice. Using this strategy, the person rationalised that there was little or not choice than to engage in the discrepant behaviour. Finally, the dissonant person could trivialise the import of the event that culminated in the dissonance.

However, in counselling interaction the strategies of cognitive dissonance theory could be useful to the counsellor in managing incompatibility between the beliefs and actions of clients especially in decision – making and problem solving. It provides the platform for the re-education of the client through cognitive restructuring in order to reduce the psychological tension that might have been generated by the disharmony in approach – approach, approach – avoidance or avoidance – avoidance valences of decision making. Campbell and Dahir (1997); and Bunce & Willower (2001) opined that counsellors’ engagement in roles other than counselling for which they trained (role conflict) resulted in cognitive dissonance; the effects of which the counsellor attempts to mitigate through attitude change strategies. From observation, the few counsellors found in the school system are saddled with full load of teaching rather than counselling (Alutu, 2005). Counsellors were also found to be members of school disciplinary committee (Bunce & Willower, 2001); Okonkwo (2005) which contradict the counselling role of the counsellor.

The author wishes to modestly submit that the system in which counsellors have found themselves may have created adverse conditions that are inimical to the survival of the counselling profession; counsellors must not resign to fate. Employing the strategy of attitude change canvassed by cognitive dissonance would help the counsellor render services to the ultimate consumers without experiencing any mental agony or distress. This is supported by EPICURUS project (2005) which found that once workers spend some time on their job their perception is contaminated by the operations of coping and cognitive dissonance, making them less critical about their job.
Implications of Counselling
Firstly, the motivation to reduce tension by counsellors is clear indication that counsellors are experiencing psychological tension due to forced compliance. The implication is that the Nigerian counsellor is experiencing inner conflict due to split in personality. The realisation by counsellors of the discrepancy between professional preparations and the duties they discharge presently in the school system, no doubt, results in cognitive dissonance. The counsellor may be mobilising the dimension of phoney as a buffer between reality and the ideal in order to remain in the system. Mobilising internal resources to cope with the reality of role conflict does help the counsellor to render services to the best of the ability. For example, compelling the counsellor to teach rather than performing the traditional role of counselling is an indication that danger lies ahead for the counselling profession. Counselling may slide into oblivion since counsellors are forced to assume teaching responsibility in secondary schools.

It has been observed that counsellors are experiencing role conflict as they are saddled with a full teaching load. It was also observed that counsellors lack personal offices but share the staff room with other teachers. A quick comparison of the results of the study with the reality on ground in the school system, it may not be out of place to conclude that the participants in the study could be responding to the phenomenon of social desirability of sounding positive rather than coming to terms with reality.

Thus cognitive dissonance dimensions could restructure their cognition positively towards their job. Counsellors could be mobilising dimensions of phoney and motivation to reduce tension as coping strategies to bridge the gap created between the ideal and their present job definition in the school system.

RECOMMENDATIONS
> The presence of cognitive dissonance is an indication of conflict in the cognition of the counsellor. The Federal Government should revisit its original policy of training counsellors who would be saddled with the responsibility of discharging guidance functions only. Federal government should set the pace by ensuring that counsellors in unity schools do not combine teaching load with counselling.

> Examination agencies such as the West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC) and National Examinations Council (NECO) should insist on the availability of a counselling unit staffed with qualified counsellors as a pre – requisite for granting approval to public and private secondary schools to register candidates for public examinations. This recommendation is borne out of the fact that learners need to be guided in their choice of subjects vis – a – vis the vocational choices they make. This, no doubt, is a major responsibility of the counsellor. This would compel school principals to provide the enabling environment for guidance counsellors to perform the legitimate role of rendering guidance services to clients.

> Cognitive dissonance is an attitude change theory. Therefore, the study recommended that counsellors should mobilise the strategies provided by the theory as means of coping with the realities about the job of the counsellor in the school system, while still maintaining the ethics of the profession.

REFERENCES


