

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ON THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS IN INFLUENCING UNITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria faces a number of challenges, including increased corruption, lawlessness, instability, and disintegration. The involvement of professional counsellors is of paramount importance, especially during the formulation of policies aimed at promoting national integration. Recognizing this critical role, the present study explored how counsellors contribute to fostering unity in Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was utilized to systematically examine the research problem. The sampling procedure followed a multi-stage approach, beginning with stratification and culminating in purposive selection of 460 participants deemed relevant to the study objectives. Data collection was facilitated through a researcher-designed instrument, the Duties of Counsellors in Promoting Unity Questionnaire (DCPUQ), developed in alignment with the study constructs. Quantitative data were subjected to both descriptive statistical analysis and inferential testing using independent samples *t*-test. All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. Based on gender, level of education, and number of years of employment, the results showed a substantial variation in the role that counsellors had in fostering togetherness. It was suggested, based on the study's findings, that more school counsellors educate children about the importance of Nigerian unity and integration. Professional counselling services, especially advocacy visits/trips, be employed in helping to facilitate the unity of Nigeria. Female counsellors, counsellors with postgraduate qualification and with 20 years and above professional experience should be more involved in the advocacy of Nigeria's unity in the course of their professional duties. Professional counsellors should legal framework and advocacy platform for national unity discourse. Counsellors are encouraged to engage in collaborative efforts with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant stakeholders to organize seminars and workshops that address contemporary issues pertaining to national integration and unity.

Keywords: Unity, Professionalism, Counsellors, Duties, Nigeria

Introduction

Government and religious organizations in Nigeria are concerned about the issue of disunity among Nigerians of different tribes and cultures. The activities of the nation's Boko Haram insurgency reflect this. Daniel and Ajiyetu (2023) contend that unresolved ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria largely result from a breakdown in harmony among the country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations, which contributes significantly to national disunity. Orji et al (2025) identify socio-political instability and a lack of unity as critical threats to Nigeria's peaceful coexistence. Additionally, Li et al (2023) argue that the fair distribution of natural resources is essential to fostering national cohesion and promoting sustainable development.

Since democracy was restored in 1999, politicians' greed for wealth accumulation has been the main driver of violence and the breakdown of Nigerian society. The 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War was allegedly waged to maintain Nigeria's unity, but its aftermath has caused the nation to fall apart. The incidents of corrupt governors that came to light exposed the shortcomings in our political system. The absence of a committed and captivating leader has impeded the nation's advancement (Nicholas et al., 2016). The main issue is that our political leaders are unable to think of strategies to encourage harmony and peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's diverse tribes. Oyewole et al (2018), acknowledged that militants in the Niger Delta have persistently called for specific rights that, if not granted, have resulted in resurgence, security threats, and additional disintegration. Wanogho (2011) as cited in Omi-Ujuanbi and Obiyan (2024) further holds that Nigerians are becoming concerned about the actions of the Islamic terrorist organization Boko Haram and its international linkages to ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The militancy and social restlessness of our youths pose serious obstacles to the peaceful coexistence and national integration of the nation. The Nigerian efforts to achieve national integration could not be successful (Onifade, 2013 as cited in Omi-Ujuanbi & Obiyan 2024).

To achieve national unity, more National conferences are needed (Nicholas et al., 2016). The government should actively and knowingly downplay bigotry based on race, ethnicity, religion, and culture, (Omi-Ujuanbi & Obiyan, 2024). Eze et al (2015) stated that in an effort to support promoted national integration, state creation was used as a strategy. The capacity of Nigerian citizens to share a common understanding, attitudes, beliefs, skills, and goals is essential for the nation's survival (Ibrahim & Chaminda, 2017). This tolerance encompasses not only economic, social, and political stability but also broader aspects of national cohesion.

These qualities can be ingrained in young people from very early on in their educational journey. Therefore, it is impossible to overstate the value of guidance and counselling in this regard. According to Omi-Ujuanbi and Obiyan (2024), the government ought to move quickly to pass legislation endorsing the counselling profession since qualified counsellors can contribute to the maintenance of effective national unity. Counsellors are qualified and equipped to support positive, healthy relationships in the community. They participate in

preventive and curative intervention programs as licensed therapists. In order to solve problems, the client and the counsellor frequently work together.

According to Adeoye (2004, as cited in Omi-Ujuanbi & Obiyan, 2024), counselling is a specialized field within psychology that involves assisting individuals to enhance their overall well-being, alleviate emotional distress, resolve crises, and improve their capacity for creativity, innovation, and sound decision-making. Bolu-Steve et al. (2016) emphasized that human behaviour is largely shaped by environmental factors. From a behaviourist perspective, behaviour is learned and, consequently, can also be unlearned. In this regard, counsellors play a vital role in helping individuals acquire new skills, promote peaceful coexistence among diverse groups, enhance communication and negotiation abilities, and ultimately, modify maladaptive behaviours. Akinyemi (2020) highlights the pressing need for qualified, competent, and certified counsellors to effectively address the ongoing issues of instability and disunity within contemporary Nigerian society. These professionals play a pivotal role in supporting government efforts by providing evidence-based guidance for informed policy-making.

Furthermore, Bolu-Steve et al. (2020) contend that counsellors, regardless of their level of experience or credentials, are essential in promoting national integration and peaceful coexistence through the identification of core causes of disunity and the development of focused intervention strategies. Through the formulation of relevant goals and the application of appropriate techniques suited to the specific needs of different communities, counsellors contribute meaningfully to national cohesion. Furthermore, with the backing of professional bodies such as the Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) and the Association of Professional Counsellors in Nigeria (APROCON), counsellors can engage in community outreach programmes. Such initiatives may encompass enlightenment campaigns, seminars, and workshops designed to educate the public on the importance and long-term advantages of national unity and stability.

Sokari (2006, as cited in Omi-Ujuanbi & Obiyan, 2024) emphasized that the effective utilization of information is vital for liberating individuals from ignorance, misconceptions, and the broader limitations that hinder national development. In this context, the application of Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) can serve as a valuable tool for transforming the cognitive distortions of individuals who engage in behaviors that threaten national unity. Counsellors play a significant role in reshaping the thought patterns of young people by actively discouraging tendencies such as sectionalism, violence, and divisive ideologies (Dada & Owolabi, 2023). School counsellors, in particular, can employ strategies such as group therapy, modeling, and reinforcement techniques to foster a sense of stability, national consciousness, and integration among the youth (Enem, 2018). Moreover, the delivery of counselling services varies based on the level of training and professional competence of the counsellor, which influences the methods and depth of interventions provided (Bukoye et al., 2018). As such, the need to ensure Nigeria's unity is a task that must be performed by counsellors. Hence, the need why the researchers embarked on this critical discourse on the role

of professional counsellors in influencing unity in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Since gaining independence, Nigeria has grappled with the complex challenge of uniting its diverse ethnic and religious groups. Despite numerous government-led initiatives aimed at cultivating a cohesive national identity, Nigeria continues to grapple with deepening divisions, predominantly along ethnic and religious lines. This enduring fragmentation undermines social cohesion, destabilizes the political landscape, and impedes sustainable national development. While interventions such as the establishment of National Unity Schools, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), and the promotion of national symbols have been implemented to bridge these divides, their impact has been limited, as evidenced by persistent disintegration trends. Prior research has explored various dimensions of this challenge: Ibrahim and Chaminda (2017) advocated for strategic repositioning toward sustainable unity, Osimen et al. (2013) analyzed the complex interplay of ethnicity and identity crises, and Adeleye (2014) identified structural impediments to socio-political stability. However, these studies predominantly emphasize macro-level political and social factors, often overlooking the micro-level psychosocial interventions necessary to address the roots of disunity. Notably absent from the literature is a focused inquiry into the potential contributions of professional counsellors—agents uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue, reconciliation, and attitudinal change.

Addressing this critical gap, the present study seeks to interrogate the roles and responsibilities of professional counsellors in advancing national integration, thereby offering novel insights into psychosocial strategies that complement existing policy frameworks for unity and national cohesion.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to examine the roles of professional counsellors in promoting national unity among Nigerians. Specifically, it aimed to investigate the influence of selected demographic variables—gender, educational qualification, and years of professional experience—on the nature and extent of counsellors' responsibilities in fostering national integration and cohesion.

Research Question

The study is guided by one research question:

1. What are the specific contributions of professional counsellors to the advancement of national unity in Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses formulated to guide this study, were tested at 0.05 significance level:

1. There is no significant difference in the roles performed by male and female counsellors

- in promoting national unity in Nigeria.
2. Educational qualification has no significant effect on the duties performed by counsellors in fostering national integration.
 3. The number of years of professional experience does not significantly influence the responsibilities of counsellors in promoting national unity.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design. The target population comprised all professionally trained counsellors in Nigeria. A multi-stage sampling technique was utilized to select participants. In the first stage, all six geopolitical zones were considered, from which five zones were purposively selected based on criteria including population size and geographical representation. In the second stage, two states were randomly chosen from each of the five selected zones. Consequently, a total of 460 counsellors, with 10 respondents drawn from each selected state, participated in the study. Data were collected using the *Duties of Counsellors in Promoting Unity Questionnaire* (DCPUQ), a self-developed instrument grounded in an extensive review of relevant literature. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section A captured respondents' demographic information, while Section B comprised items specifically designed to assess the roles and responsibilities of counsellors in promoting national unity. Section B utilized a four-point Likert scale with response options ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1).

To ensure content validity, the draft instrument was subjected to expert review by specialists in counselling and education, whose feedback was integrated into the final version. The reliability of the DCPUQ was established via the test-retest method over a four-week interval. The instrument was administered to a pilot sample of 20 primary school counsellors in Ilorin metropolis. Analysis using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.68, indicating acceptable consistency. This value was considered acceptable, indicating that the instrument was statistically reliable for the study. Descriptive and independent sample T-test statistics were used for the analyses of collected data at 95% (0.05) confidence level.

Presentation of Results

Demographic Data

This section provides an analysis of the data collected from the respondents. Frequencies and percentages are employed to succinctly summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants, offering a comprehensive overview of the sample profile.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Personal Data	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	276	60.0
Female	184	40.0
Total	460	100.0
Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
First Degree	368	80.0
Postgraduate	92	20.0
Total	460	100.0
Years of Service	Frequency	Percentage
1 – 10 years	345	75.0
11 – 20 years	115	25.0
Above 20 years	-	-
Total	460	100.0

Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the 460 respondents involved in the study. Among them, 276 (60%) were male, while 184 (40%) were female. In terms of educational qualification, the majority—368 respondents (80%)—held a first degree, whereas 92 respondents (20%) possessed a postgraduate degree. Regarding years of service, 345 respondents (75%) had between 1 and 10 years of experience, while 115 respondents (25%) had between 11 and 20 years of service.

Research Question One: What are the specific contributions of professional counsellors to the advancement of national unity in Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean Scores and Rank Order of the Duties of Counsellors in Promoting Unity

Item No.	Counsellor’s duties in promoting unity include:	Mean	Rank
1	advocacy visits/trips	3.05	1st
9	behaviour modification and adjustment	3.00	2 nd
7	Rehabilitation	2.85	3 rd
15	organizing seminars/workshops on how to tackle contemporary issues	2.75	4 th
14	conflict resolution skill development	2.62	5 th
10	Promoting a spirit of reconciliation among the youths	2.60	6 th
3	assertiveness training	2.57	7 th
13	reduction of deviancy among in-school adolescents	2.55	8 th
2	encouraging the spirit tolerance among various ethnic groups	2.54	9 th
11	helping people of all ages improve on their communication skills	2.52	10 th
4	teaching of negotiation skills to people of all age groups	2.51	11 th
5	community counselling for awareness and attainment of uniform goals	2.49	12 th
8	Cognitive restructuring of Clients with psychological concerns	2.47	13 th
12	developing clients coping strategies to problems	2.42	14 th
6	dialoguing with aggrieved groups	2.38	15 th

Table 2 presents the mean scores and rank order of the perceived duties of professional counsellors in promoting unity in Nigeria. The results indicate that the top three duties identified by respondents are: advocacy visits/trips (Item 1, Mean = 3.05), behaviour modification and adjustment (Item 9, Mean = 3.00), and rehabilitation (Item 7, Mean = 2.85). These were ranked first, second, and third, respectively. Conversely, the item ranked lowest was Item 6, with a mean score of 2.38. Given that eleven out of the fifteen items recorded mean scores above the mid-point value of 2.50, it can be inferred that the majority of respondents affirmed the significant role of counsellors in promoting national unity.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the roles performed by male and female counsellors in promoting national unity in Nigeria

Table 3: Independent Sample T-Test Analysis of Duties of Counsellors in Promoting Unity Based on Gender

Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	Cal. t-value	p-value
Male	276	49.08	5.64	458	10.51*	0.001
Female	184	44.25	3.23			

Significant, $p < 0.05$

Table 3 presents the results of the independent samples t-test examining the differences in the duties of professional counsellors in promoting unity in Nigeria based on gender. The analysis yielded a t-value of 10.51 and a p-value of 0.001. Given that the p-value is less than the 0.05 significance threshold, the null hypothesis is rejected. This result indicates a statistically significant difference in perceptions of the duties of professional counsellors in promoting unity between male and female respondents. Specifically, male counsellors reported a higher mean score (Mean = 49.08) compared to their female counterparts (Mean = 44.25), suggesting that male counsellors are perceived to play a more prominent role in promoting national unity.

Hypothesis Two: Educational qualification has no significant effect on the duties performed by counsellors in fostering national integration.

Table 4: Independent Sample T-Test Analysis of Professional Counsellors' Duties in Promoting Unity Based on Educational Qualification

Edu. Qualification	N	Mean	SD	df	Cal. t-value	p-value
First Degree	368	47.87	5.10	458	6.00*	0.02
Postgraduate	92	44.25	5.47			

Significant, $p < 0.05$

Table 4 summarizes the results of the independent samples t-test assessing the impact of educational qualification on the duties of professional counsellors in promoting national unity in Nigeria. The test yielded a t-value of 6.00 and a p-value of 0.02. As the p-value is less than the 0.05 significance criterion, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a significant difference in the roles of counsellors based on their educational qualifications. Specifically, counsellors with a first degree reported a higher mean score (Mean = 47.87) compared to those with a postgraduate degree (Mean = 44.25). This suggests that first degree holders are perceived to be more engaged in promoting unity than their postgraduate counterparts.

Hypothesis Three: The number of years of professional experience does not significantly influence the responsibilities of counsellors in promoting national unity.

Table 5: Independent Sample T-Test Analysis of Duties of Counsellors in Promoting Unity Based on Years of Professional Experience

Years of Service	N	Mean	SD	df	Cal. t-value	p-value
1 – 10 years	345	48.26	4.04	458	8.26*	0.01
11 – 20 years	115	43.80	7.19			

*Significant, $p < 0.05$

Table 5 presents the results of the independent samples t-test conducted to assess differences in the duties of professional counsellors in promoting unity in Nigeria based on years of service. The analysis yielded a t-value of 8.26 and a p-value of 0.01. Since the p-value is below the 0.05 significance threshold, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a statistically significant difference in counsellors’ roles according to their years of professional experience. This outcome indicated a significant difference in the roles of counsellors based on their years of service. Counsellors with 1–10 years of experience recorded a higher mean score (Mean = 48.26) compared to those with 11–20 years of service (Mean = 43.80), suggesting that early-career counsellors are more actively involved in efforts to promote national unity.

Discussion

The study’s findings highlighted several critical roles undertaken by professional counsellors in advancing national unity in Nigeria, with advocacy visits emerging as the most prominent. This duty was ranked first among the listed roles, highlighting its perceived effectiveness in fostering national cohesion. Behaviour modification and adjustment, ranked second, along with rehabilitation, ranked third, emphasize the counsellor’s function in transforming attitudes and steering individuals toward socially acceptable behaviours. Other notable duties include organizing seminars and workshops on contemporary social issues (ranked fourth), which serve as platforms for raising awareness and equipping individuals with skills necessary for navigating societal challenges. Conflict resolution skill development was identified as the fifth most significant duty, reflecting the imperative of equipping individuals with constructive and non-violent approaches to dispute management. Promoting a spirit of reconciliation among the youth ranked sixth, emphasizing targeted interventions aimed at restoring harmony and fostering unity within younger demographics. Furthermore, counsellors are tasked with providing assertiveness training, positioned seventh in priority, alongside initiatives focused on curbing deviant behaviours prevalent among adolescent student (eighth), and promoting tolerance among diverse ethnic groups (ninth). These roles emphasize the proactive nature of counselling in promoting inclusion, emotional intelligence, and positive interpersonal relationships. Also crucial are enhancing communication skills (tenth) and

teaching negotiation techniques (eleventh), both of which support peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. Further roles include community counselling to promote collective goals (twelfth), cognitive restructuring of clients with psychological challenges (thirteenth), and helping clients develop coping strategies (fourteenth). The least ranked duty, dialoguing with aggrieved groups (fifteenth), while rated lower, still plays a vital role in conflict resolution and reconciliation processes. The high ranking of advocacy visits reinforces the view that such engagements can serve as powerful tools for enlightenment, particularly in areas experiencing social unrest or disunity. As Agbakwuru and Opara (2012, as cited in Bolu-Steve et al., 2020) observed, advocacy is critical when significant social problems arise that require the attention and intervention of stakeholders. In this context, professional counsellors are well-positioned to initiate and facilitate these efforts, thereby contributing meaningfully to the process of national integration.

The findings of the study indicate a statistically significant gender-based variation in counsellors' perceptions of their roles in advancing national integration, with male counsellors showing greater disposition toward duties that support national unity. This suggests that gender plays a role in shaping perceptions, particularly on issues of national significance. One possible explanation for this finding is that male counsellors may feel a stronger societal or identity-based obligation to contribute to national cohesion, viewing unity as essential to national development and stability. This aligns with Adeleye's (2014) observation that the prevailing state of disunity and instability in Nigeria is a source of discomfort for many citizens. Given this, the need for expanded counselling services—both private and public—is emphasized as a viable response to the complex and multifaceted nature of disunity in the country. Counsellors, through structured interventions and policy advocacy, can play a transformative role in bridging divides and fostering collective national identity.

The study further revealed that respondents' educational qualifications significantly influenced their perspectives on their professional responsibilities in fostering national unity. Specifically, counsellors holding first degrees demonstrated a stronger inclination toward promoting Nigerian unity compared to their counterparts with postgraduate qualifications. The possible reason for this findings is that first degree holders are new in the counselling profession and are more interested in having an environment to practice their training and making a mark towards national unity. Bukoye et al. (2018) highlighted that counselling services vary in scope and approach depending on the counsellor's level of training, which may account for differences in perception between the two groups. First-degree holders may be more engaged in direct community-based interventions, while those with higher qualifications might focus on theoretical frameworks or policy-level engagements. It is therefore not unusual that their views on national integration diverge. Supporting this perspective, Akinyemi (2020) emphasized that Nigeria's current socio-political climate—marked by instability and division—requires the active involvement of qualified, competent, and certified counsellors. Their expertise is essential for guiding the government in making informed decisions aimed at

promoting peace, unity, and national development.

The findings also revealed that respondents differed significantly in their perceptions of the role of counsellors in promoting national cohesion based on their years of professional service. Counsellors possessing between one and ten years (1-10) of professional experience exhibited a higher level of engagement and commitment toward advancing national unity than their counterparts with eleven to twenty years (11-20) of service. This difference may stem from the enthusiasm, fresh perspectives, and motivation often observed in early-career professionals, who are keen to make impactful contributions and establish a strong professional identity. Additionally, newer counsellors may be more attuned to contemporary issues affecting national integration, possibly due to recent academic exposure and training in emerging counselling strategies. In contrast, those with longer years of service might adopt a more reserved or policy-oriented approach, having experienced the complexities and challenges of effecting change over time. This variation underscores the need for continuous professional development and engagement opportunities for all counsellors, regardless of years of service, to ensure sustained commitment to national unity goals. Counsellors play a crucial role in reshaping the cognitive frameworks of young individuals by actively discouraging divisive tendencies such as sectionalism, violence, and disintegration (Dada & Owolabi, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Bolu-Steve et al. (2020), who affirmed that counsellors—regardless of their academic qualifications or years of experience—possess the capacity to foster national integration and peaceful coexistence by identifying and addressing the underlying factors that hinder unity. To achieve this, counsellors are encouraged to facilitate a range of educational and sensitization activities including public lectures, seminars, workshops, rallies, and awareness campaigns. These efforts must be inclusive and devoid of ethnic, cultural, religious, or racial bias. Furthermore, counsellors often implement additional initiatives such as in-situ training, “train-the-trainer” programs, and community-based enlightenment sessions to broaden their impact. Through these proactive engagements, counsellors contribute meaningfully to building a unified and harmonious society.

Conclusion

Counselling professional duties are needed for national cohesion and unification of all ethnic and religious groups. This study established that professional counselling duties can help to ensure Nigeria’s unity. The findings underscore the pivotal role of counsellors in facilitating national integration and sustaining peaceful coexistence by systematically identifying and mitigating the underlying factors that hinder these objectives. Moreover, counsellors are essential agents in transforming the mindset of young individuals, proactively discouraging divisive tendencies such as sectionalism, violence, and societal disunity. The study further revealed that male counsellors, those with first degrees, and those with 1-20 years of experience are particularly inclined toward fostering national unity, demonstrating a strong commitment to addressing the challenges of unity and national cohesion.

Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Professional counselling services, especially advocacy visits/trips, be employed in helping to facilitate the unity of Nigeria.
2. Female counsellors should be more involved in the advocacy of Nigeria's unity in the course of their professional duties.
3. Professional counsellors with postgraduate qualifications are encouraged to be more involved in national unity discourse.
4. Professional counsellors with 20 years and above of service should be encouraged to be involved in the promotion of national unity through professional counselling duties.
5. Professional counsellors should legal framework and advocacy platform for national unity discourse.
6. Professional counsellors should engage collaboratively with government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and other key stakeholders to facilitate seminars and workshops that address urgent issues pertaining to national integration and unity. This collaborative effort will help amplify the impact of unity-focused initiatives and foster a more inclusive approach to addressing national challenges.

Implication for Counsellors

Counselling professional programmes and services should be integrated into national unity discourse and programmes.

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