

ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS IN MEDIATING FAMILY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD DISPUTES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Family and Neighbourhood Disputes in Nigeria often stem from cultural differences, financial strains, and communication breakdowns, threatening social harmony and community stability. Professional counsellors play a pivotal role in mediating such conflicts by integrating psychological insight, conflict resolution skills, and cultural competence. Drawing on transformative mediation, humanistic counselling, systems theory, and narrative approaches, counsellors provide safe, neutral spaces that foster empathy, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving. Their interventions address not only surface disagreements but also the underlying emotional and relational dynamics that legal remedies frequently overlook. In family settings, counsellors manage disputes involving marital breakdowns, parent-child tensions, inheritance, and blended family challenges, while in neighbourhoods, they resolve conflicts over property, noise, and cultural misunderstandings. Challenges such as power imbalances, confidentiality dilemmas, and cultural sensitivity underscore the ethical complexities of this work. Nonetheless, through community-based mediation, collaboration with traditional and religious leaders, and public awareness programmes, counsellors significantly contribute to social cohesion. The paper suggests policy integration of counselling into Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), capacity building, ethical oversight, and ongoing research to strengthen practice. Ultimately, counsellors not only resolve immediate disputes but also build resilience, healthier communication patterns, and stronger family and community bonds. Their role is essential in promoting sustainable peace, cultural respect, and long-term well-being in Nigerian society.

Keywords: Family, Counsellors, Neighbourhoods, Dispute, Nigeria

Introduction

Family and neighbourhood disputes, which often stem from cultural differences, financial

hardships, and communication failures, pose a danger to social harmony in Nigeria. Professional counsellors play a crucial role in resolving such disagreements by encouraging discussion, fostering mutual understanding, and helping parties come to acceptable settlements. By repairing relationships, preventing escalation, and fostering community cohesion through their communication, empathy, and conflict management abilities, counsellors support stability and healthy interpersonal connections in families and localities.

Human relationships often involve conflict, which can take many different forms, from small arguments to long-standing disagreements. According to Hoogenboom, Dijkstra, and Beersma (2024), the way disputes are handled influences their results rather than the conflict itself being intrinsically harmful. Unresolved conflicts are known to cause long-lasting hostility, mental health issues, social alienation, and the disintegration of community bonds, especially within families and neighbourhoods. Interpersonal disputes are made more difficult by the growing constraints that modern societies confront, such as urbanisation, cultural diversity, and economic strains.

Concerns about inheritance, caring, divorce, and intergenerational disparities are common issues in family disputes. In a similar vein, neighbourhood disputes can result from cultural misunderstandings, property boundaries, societal prejudices, and noise complaints. These disagreements are rarely merely about surface-level disagreements and are often entwined with personal values, histories, and emotions. Therefore, legal remedies typically fail to address the relational and emotional variables that drive disagreements, despite being crucial in some contexts (Sonjaya, Hanan & Sururie, 2025).

Family dispute refers to any disagreement that results from competing expectations, values, or resource competition amongst family members (couples, parents and children, siblings, in-laws, etc.). Sociological studies view these disputes as emotionally charged because they include long-term, personal relationships that often have overlapping social, cultural, and economic components. For example, characterise family conflict as involving emotional instability between couples, poor communication, blame-shifting, and verbal or physical abuse (Mokhira, 2024).

As a result, the significance of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) techniques has become increasingly apparent. According to Shoukat, Abuzar, and Shah (2025), mediation is one of the best ways to resolve conflicts outside of aggressive legal systems. In this paradigm, professional counsellors play a crucial role as mediators who integrate therapeutic skills with conflict resolution strategies. They create safe environments for open communication, promote understanding amongst people, and help individuals and groups pinpoint the root causes of disputes. Because of their training in human behaviour, empathy, and communication, they are able to deal with not just the evident issues but also the unspoken emotions that often result in conflicts.

The expansion of community-based mediation programs is another proof of the importance of easily available, non-legal remedies. In these programs, counsellors act as a bridge between the

community and official institutions, fostering resilience and social cohesion. Licensed counsellors contribute to healthier communities and better families by providing people with the skills to manage conflict in a healthy way.

This paper explores the complex role that professional counsellors play in resolving conflicts within families and communities, looking at theoretical frameworks, real-world strategies, and the wider social effects of their work. It contends that for communities looking for long-term peace and sustainable conflict resolution, incorporating professional counselling within mediation procedures is not just advantageous but crucial.

Theoretical Framework

The mediation role of professional counsellors is supported by a number of important ideas of counselling and conflict resolution, which collectively influence the methods and strategies they use. Bush and Folger (2015) developed transformative mediation, which focuses on the twin objectives of empowerment and recognition, helping each side in a dispute to feel more capable and to see things from the other's point of view. This procedure is essential for changing unfavourable interaction patterns into productive discourse.

Additionally, the principles of humanistic counselling, championed by Carl Rogers (1957), emphasises the value of genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive respect. During mediation sessions, these guidelines help therapists foster openness, establish a nonjudgmental environment, and develop trust. The voluntary and cooperative nature of mediation is supported in such an environment.

Counsellors also utilise systems theory, especially in family mediation, where it is essential to comprehend the dynamics and patterns of relationships inside a family (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012). Counsellors assist clients in understanding how behaviours and communication styles contribute to persistent disputes by seeing conflicts as systemic rather than individual episodes.

Another pertinent paradigm is narrative mediation, which was created by Winslade and Monk (2017) suggests that dominant, problem-filled narratives sustain conflicts. The re-authoring of these stories is facilitated by counsellors with training in narrative techniques, allowing conflicting parties to change their viewpoints and jointly create new, more positive narratives.

Professional counsellors serve as change agents and discussion facilitators by combining these approaches. They incorporate active listening, emotional support, and communication skills training to provide safe spaces for people to express themselves and discover common ground. In this sense, the theoretical underpinnings of transformative, humanistic, systemic, and narrative methods work together to help counsellors effectively and empathetically mediate family and neighbourhood conflicts.

The Role of Counsellors in Family Disputes

Family conflicts cover a broad range of problems, including as marital dissolution, parent-child conflicts, sibling rivalry, inheritance disputes, and conflicts arising from mixed families. Unresolved family conflict can have a significant negative impact on the mental health of those involved, particularly children, who may suffer from anxiety, depression, or behavioural problems (Nichols, 2013).

In resolving such disputes, professional counsellors have a variety of roles to play. To examine interaction patterns and pinpoint maladaptive behaviours that sustain conflict, they rely on family systems therapy (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012). They assist families in examining cultural norms, generational influences, and underlying animosities that frequently underlie superficial disputes through organised sessions.

Counsellors mediate family disputes through the following:

1. Providing a safe, neutral environment where each party feels heard without fear of judgment or retaliation.
2. Encouraging active listening, empathy, and respectful communication techniques.
3. Helping family members articulate their needs and underlying emotions, moving beyond blame and defensiveness.
4. Facilitating collaborative problem-solving and negotiation, guiding families to develop mutually agreeable solutions.

In addition to these methods, therapists frequently use psychoeducation to teach family members how to resolve conflicts, control their emotions, and communicate in a healthy way.

This lessens the possibility of recurrent crises by enabling families to resolve disputes in the future in a constructive manner.

Families that participate in mediation with counsellors are less likely to turn to expensive and combative litigation, according to research. Studies by (McGowan, 2018) demonstrate that mediated divorce settlements result in higher parental satisfaction, better co-parenting relationships, and improved outcomes for children compared to court-imposed solutions. Moreover, mediation can be adapted for culturally diverse families, where counsellors act as cultural brokers, ensuring that interventions respect unique family norms and traditions.

Additionally, counsellors are crucial in high-conflict scenarios like custody battles and abuse accusations. Counsellors work with attorneys, social workers, and child protection organisations to put the safety and best interests of vulnerable family members first, but they do not take the role of legal authorities.

Professional counsellors play a major role in turning damaging family disputes into chances

for development, healing, and better relationships through ongoing support, follow-up sessions, and referrals to specialised services when necessary.

The Role of Counsellors in Neighbourhood Disputes

Neighbourhood disputes can take many different forms, such as disputes about shared facilities, property lines, noise levels, cultural differences, or even lifestyle choices. Even while these disputes may seem insignificant, if they are not resolved, they have the potential to destroy community harmony and develop into long-lasting feuds or legal disputes (Craver, 2015). Due to intimate living quarters and a diverse population, these conflicts are even more common in densely populated urban areas.

In order to keep these conflicts from getting worse, professional counsellors who work via local conflict resolution centers or community mediation programs are essential. They do more than just negotiate; they also serve as educators, community builders, and facilitators.

Counsellors mediate neighbourhood disputes by:

- i. Assessing the emotional and relational dynamics fueling the conflict, including hidden biases or cultural misunderstandings.
- ii. Creating a neutral, confidential venue where parties feel safe to express grievances and fears without judgment.
- iii. Encouraging open dialogue, active listening, and mutual respect, ensuring that all voices are heard, including marginalized or less assertive community members.
- iv. Promoting co-created solutions that address both practical concerns and emotional needs, increasing the likelihood of sustainable agreements.
- v. Teaching community members conflict resolution skills, communication strategies, and empathy, thereby strengthening the community's capacity to manage future disputes independently.

Research from community mediation programs across the globe shows that when counsellors arbitrate neighbourhood disagreements, the rates of violence, vandalism, and recurring arguments are reduced (Smith, 2020). In addition to resolving immediate disputes, these initiatives help neighbourhoods develop social capital and trust.

Additionally, counsellors modify their techniques to fit cultural situations, serving as cultural translators when miscommunications result from disparities in traditions, languages, or customs. They aid in bridging cultural gaps and averting disputes stemming from bias or prejudices by promoting understanding. Most importantly, counsellors should remain neutral and do not impose solutions but guide parties to develop agreements they genuinely accept. In cases where power imbalances exist, such as disputes involving vulnerable tenants or minority groups, counsellors take steps to ensure fairness and equity.

In the end, the involvement of qualified counsellors in community mediation improves social cohesion, encourages harmonious cohabitation, and gives communities the ability to settle disputes amicably while lessening the strain on official legal systems.

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Professional counsellors mediate family and neighbourhood conflicts in a transforming way, but their work is not without major obstacles and complicated ethical issues. Addressing power disparities that may occur when one side controls the discussion because of social standing, financial influence, or cultural privilege is one of the main difficulties (Asghar, Shami & Ashraf, 2025). To guarantee that every opinion is heard equally, counsellors must be watchful in handling such imbalances.

Additionally, cultural sensitivity presents special difficulties. Because they frequently work with people from different backgrounds, mediators must be knowledgeable of cultural conventions, values, and communication styles. Biases can be reinforced and the mediation process compromised by misinterpreting or ignoring cultural differences. To successfully negotiate these intricacies, counsellors must dedicate themselves to ongoing cultural competency training and introspection.

In mediation practice, ethical principles including informed consent, objectivity, and professional boundaries cannot be compromised. Counsellors need to make sure that everyone is aware of their rights, the mediation process, and the fact that participation is entirely voluntary. Counsellors must avoid taking sides, imposing their values, or unnecessarily influencing results in order to maintain professional neutrality.

Professional therapists must also be able to recognise when a conflict is beyond the purview of mediation and has to be referred to legal authorities, protective services, or other experts. Law enforcement and social services must work together right once in cases involving criminal activity, serious domestic abuse, or risks to the protection of children in order to protect individuals who are at risk.

Professional counsellors manage the difficult balance between assisting in conflict resolution and safeguarding the rights and well-being of all parties involved by upholding ethical standards, participating in continuous supervision, and being aware of the boundaries of their job.

Case Study

A thorough case study demonstrates the usefulness of counsellors in resolving local conflicts. Long-term locals and an increasing number of recent immigrants whose cultural customs deviated from accepted neighbourhood norms clashed in one town. According to Dias, Pereira, Vieira, Barbosa, Quintão, and Lafraia (2023), misunderstandings regarding social gatherings, common places, and noise levels led to resentment that might develop into formal complaints and

community disintegration.

Through a local community mediation program, a professional counsellor intervened to promote communication. In order to provide a safe space for both groups to express their worries and cultural viewpoints, the counsellor set up organised gatherings. The counsellor assisted both parties in identifying common values and interests in community safety and peace by actively listening, rephrasing unfavourable presumptions, and clearing up misunderstandings.

The counsellor promoted trust and dispelled preconceptions by incorporating culturally sensitive methods including employing translators and recognising customs. After the mediation sessions, a set of community rules that addressed things like celebration events, shared space etiquette, and quiet hours were mutually agreed upon.

In addition to settling the immediate conflict, the counselor's efforts sparked the formation of a neighbourhood council with members from various ethnic backgrounds. In order to arrange inclusive community events, build relationships, and proactively handle new disputes, this council now convenes on a regular basis. The story demonstrates how counsellors can turn disagreements into chances for long-term community building and intercultural understanding by combining mediation techniques with cultural knowledge.

Conclusion

Professional counsellors bring an invaluable blend of psychological insight, conflict resolution expertise, and cultural sensitivity to the mediation of family and neighbourhood disputes. Their ability to address the emotional and relational dimensions of conflict sets them apart from purely legal or administrative interventions. Through the idea of creating safe spaces for dialogue, encouraging mutual understanding, and facilitating collaborative problem-solving, counsellors help communities resolve tensions before they escalate into costly legal battles or long-standing animosity. Integrating professional counsellors into community mediation frameworks and local dispute resolution initiatives can significantly enhance social cohesion, promote respect for cultural diversity, and build conflict resilience within families and neighbourhoods. Their role contributes not only to immediate dispute resolution but also to the development of healthier communication patterns and stronger, more connected communities. In an increasingly diverse and complex world, investing in the training and deployment of counsellors as mediators is a vital step towards sustainable peace and community well-being.

Suggestions on the Challenges of Mediating Family Dispute in Nigeria

The following suggestions were made to guide properly in handling the challenges of challenges of mediating family dispute in Nigeria.

1. **Institutionalize Community Mediation Centres:** Community-based mediation centers should be established by the Nigerian government in partnership with professional

counselling bodies. These facilities would lessen an excessive dependence on the legal system by offering easily available, non-legal channels for resolving conflicts.

2. **Integrate Counsellors into Local Governance Structures:** Professional counsellors should be officially recognised by local government officials as mediators in family and neighbourhood conflicts. This integration will guarantee that conflicts are handled comprehensively, taking relational, cultural, and emotional factors into account.
3. **Enhance Counsellor Training on Cultural Competence:** Counsellors should be continuously trained in changing social dynamics, indigenous conflict resolution techniques, and cultural sensitivity. This would enable them to resolve conflicts arising from cultural misinterpretations and diversity in an efficient manner.
4. **Promote Public Awareness of ADR and Counselling Services:** Families and communities should be made aware of the advantages of counselling and mediation as alternatives to litigation through awareness campaigns. This will lessen the escalation of confrontations by promoting early intervention.
5. **Strengthen Ethical and Legal Safeguards:** Counsellors should be guided in managing confidentiality, power disparities, and high-risk situations (such as abuse or violence) by clear ethical norms and supported legal frameworks. Additionally, cooperation with security agencies, legal institutions, and social workers should be strengthened.
6. **Policy Integration of Counselling into ADR Mechanisms:** Professional counsellors should be formally incorporated into state and municipal Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) systems by the Nigerian government. They should collaborate with mediators, attorneys, and traditional leaders to resolve family and neighbourhood conflicts.
7. **Building Capacity and Professional Development:** To improve counsellors' efficacy in a variety of settings, counselling associations should regularly host conferences, seminars, and certification programs that concentrate on conflict resolution, trauma-informed care, and culturally sensitive mediation.
8. **Community-Based Preventive Programmes:** To reduce the possibility that disagreements may turn into fights, counsellors should create proactive family and community education programs on stress management, emotional control, and communication techniques.
9. **Collaborative Networks with Traditional and Religious Leaders:** Counsellors should work with religious leaders and elders to co-mediate conflicts because of their cultural significance in Nigerian society. Counselling therapies get more credibility and community acceptance as a result of this collaboration.
10. **Strengthening Ethical Oversight:** Professional bodies such as the Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) should establish more stringent supervision mechanisms to ensure that counsellors adhere to moral norms, particularly with regard to handling power imbalances, confidentiality, and impartiality.

- 11. Research and Continuous Evaluation:** Empirical studies on the effectiveness of counselor-led mediation in Nigeria should be funded by universities and counselling societies. Ongoing assessment will produce evidence-based tactics, enhance procedures, and direct future legislation.

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