

Contextual and Systemic Barriers to Marriage and Family Counselling Practice in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Marriage and family counselling is a recognised area of specialisation within counselling psychology. Unlike individual counselling, which attained professional status in developed countries several decades ago, marriage and family counselling in Nigeria has yet to achieve comparable recognition. Its implementation has been hampered by diverse contextual challenges and the absence of an enabling environment. These barriers have largely restricted the practice to major urban centres, creating a vacuum that has been exploited by unqualified practitioners. This paper examines the numerous challenges confronting marriage and family counselling practitioners in Nigeria, including those related to practice settings, employment and remuneration, family financial management, home-based pressures, and the absence of minimum professional standards. Evidence-based strategies for addressing these challenges are recommended.

Keywords: Marriage and Family Counselling, Professional Challenges, Practice Environment, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

To fully appreciate the discussion in this paper, it is necessary to define the key operational concepts that form its conceptual foundation: marriage and family counselling, environment, and challenge. Marriage counselling, as defined by Jones (2023), is a process in which a counsellor helps individuals, couples, or families to formulate plans and resolve problems in the areas of courtship, marriage, and family relations. Harper and Harper, as cited in Fawzyah et al. (2025), further observed that marriage counselling is primarily concerned with the interpersonal relationship between spouses who experience difficulty in sustaining a satisfactory marriage. Similarly, Adejare et al. (2019) noted that marriage counselling focuses on the interpersonal problems of husband and wife, as distinct from marriage education, which is concerned with informing individuals about factors related to the marital situation.

Family counselling, on the other hand, is defined by Fullwood (2018) as counselling involving one or more members of a kinship group in which children are present. Importantly, Fullwood emphasises that children need not be seen directly by the counsellor, since the husband-wife relationship is invariably affected by the presence of children, and vice versa.

The rationale for this systemic approach rests on the recognition that when difficulties arise within a family, it is rarely appropriate to counsel one member in isolation, as the problem may reside not solely within the distressed individual but within the family system as a whole. In this vein, Varghese, Kirpekar, and Loganathan (2020) described family counselling as an interactive process that seeks to assist the family unit in restoring a homeostatic balance with which all members are comfortable. Taken together, these definitions affirm that marriage and family counselling involves purposeful professional intervention. The same authors further clarified that this intervention is directed at helping a couple to recover or preserve a failing marriage

by identifying the sources of dysfunction and developing the interpersonal skills needed to enrich and stabilise the emotional climate of the union.

It is therefore the marriage and family counsellor who provides the troubled couple with these helping experiences. For such intervention to be effective, the counsellor must engage with clients within specific settings. Proctor (2017) defines environment as the neighbourhood or context within which a practitioner operates. In the case of the marriage and family counsellor, this environment encompasses the counsellor's office, the wife's family home, the husband's residence, and the broader community. It is within these environments that the counsellor encounters challenges arising from conflicting interests, struggles for control, and entrenched cultural traditions. In this paper, the term challenge refers to questions, confrontations, obstacles, and barriers — including doubts about the legitimacy or appropriateness of a service. Such challenges are inevitable when a new practitioner enters an established social environment. Some community members may question or doubt the justification for the counsellor's services, while others may perceive the counsellor as an unwelcome rival to be marginalised. The counsellor's ability to demonstrate the legitimacy and value of marriage and family counselling will, therefore, largely determine the extent to which adaptive behaviours are strengthened and maladaptive behaviours are reduced among clients.

Challenges from the Counsellor's Office Setting

One of the foremost challenges confronting the marriage and family counsellor relates to the physical setting for practice. Given the relative novelty of marriage counselling in Nigeria, particularly in rural and semi-urban communities, the setting itself can generate significant social barriers. In many cases, it is the wife who first acknowledges the need for help and seeks intervention. However, in a typical African village setting, the idea of a woman visiting an unfamiliar professional alone to discuss marital difficulties is often regarded with suspicion. Such a visit may provoke gossip, innuendo, and social censure. Where the marriage counsellor is male and the client is female, the husband may interpret the wife's visit as evidence of infidelity or moral impropriety. This risk is compounded where the counsellor's support staff are known to both parties, as is common in close-knit community settings.

Confidentiality presents a further challenge. Where sessions are recorded or detailed case notes are maintained, female clients may fear that sensitive information will be improperly disclosed. Additionally, competition from religious practitioners — including prophets, seers, and founders of independent ministries — poses a significant challenge. These figures often regard the professional counsellor as a competitor and may engage in negative propaganda designed to diminish public confidence in the counsellor's services. By promoting the view that professional counselling offers nothing of value compared with divine revelation, such practitioners can effectively undermine the counsellor's standing within the community. These challenges are further compounded by the influence of in-laws on both sides of the marriage, whose interference can make the counsellor's task considerably more difficult.

Fees and Payment for Services

Payment for professional services represents another significant challenge for marriage and family counsellors in Nigeria. Communities in this region have long been accustomed to obtaining family advice at no cost from parents, in-laws, clergy, neighbours, and other informal support figures. In this cultural context, charging a fee for counselling services may be perceived as inappropriate or mercenary, and the entire exercise may be viewed more favourably if offered free of charge.

Nevertheless, the counsellor has legitimate professional expenses to meet, including the purchase of reference materials, attendance at capacity-building workshops and conferences, maintenance of filing systems, information technology resources, and reliable transportation for client visits. These operational costs necessitate a structured fee arrangement. Such professional charges need not be disproportionate; they are broadly comparable to the fees charged by legal practitioners or public relations officers for similar advisory services.

Challenges of Family Financial Management

The widespread prevalence of unemployment, underemployment, and job loss has compelled many men in Nigeria to rely partly or wholly on their wives for household expenses. This represents a significant departure from the traditional model in which the husband was regarded as the sole breadwinner and unchallenged head of the household. As the financial situation of many families continues to deteriorate, increasing numbers of husbands have sought their wives' active participation in managing family finances. However, some wives — particularly those who are financially stronger than their husbands — have resisted this arrangement, declining to contribute to joint household expenses.

A recurring source of tension is the question of how family income should be pooled and managed, and who should exercise control over shared resources. A husband may insist that his wife's income is subject to his authority on the basis of cultural norms, while the wife may contest this claim, particularly where she is the higher earner. These competing perspectives place the marriage counsellor in a delicate position, requiring sensitivity and impartiality in navigating cultural expectations alongside principles of equity and fairness.

The Issue of Qualification and Minimum Standards

Marriage and family counselling in Nigeria has, to a significant degree, become an unregulated field. Gospel preachers and religious leaders are among the most prominent unqualified practitioners, and their interventions can at times be actively harmful to couples seeking help. It is not uncommon to observe individuals who, without formal training, present themselves as spiritual authorities and use esoteric or manipulative approaches to attract vulnerable congregants for what they term marriage counselling. Government policy is urgently needed to regulate and sanitise the practice environment (Yahaya, 2017).

Training and formal education are of paramount importance for the professional marriage counsellor. A general interest in helping people and goodwill toward others, while valuable, are insufficient qualifications. Knowledge of law, medicine, or theology, though relevant, does not in itself qualify an individual to practise as a marriage counsellor. Each of these disciplines contributes a partial perspective; the marriage counsellor must integrate insights from all of them while possessing additional competencies specific to the field.

In addressing the question of minimum standards, Adoga (2020) drew attention to the report of the Joint Subcommittee on Standards for Marriage Counsellors of the National Council on Family Relations (United States), which takes the following position:

"...that the appropriate graduate or professional degree for a marriage counsellor shall be in any of the following fields of study: education, home economics, law, medicine, nursing, psychology, religion, social anthropology, social work, and sociology. Besides, the same subcommittee posits that such graduates must have taken courses on: psychology of personality and development; elements of psychiatry; human biology, including the fundamentals of sex anatomy, physiology, and genetics; sociology of marriage and the family; legal aspects of marriage; and marriage and family counselling techniques."

As a final comment on this matter, Stafford argued that some form of advanced training beyond the bachelor's degree is essential for professional practice as a marriage counsellor.

The Issue of Attitudinal and Behavioural Maturity

The adage that the habit does not make the monk holds particular relevance for counselling practice. Passing professional examinations and receiving formal certification does not guarantee effective practice in the field. Accordingly, the training of marriage counsellors should encompass the development of a scientific and open-minded attitude toward human variation, including variation in sexual behaviour, and the ability to discuss sensitive issues objectively without causing harm or distress to the client.

In support of this view, Kaushik et al. (2022) observed that the marriage counsellor must be capable of discussing all questions objectively, without becoming personally or emotionally entangled in the problems of

those being helped. The counsellor must also cultivate a specific professional attitude toward individual variation and deviation. A scientific orientation in this context means that the counsellor's own biases and prejudices must not determine the handling of a case; rather, each case must be approached in light of all available evidence.

The Joint Subcommittee on Standards for Marriage Counsellors also recommended the following personal and professional qualities:

- An attitude of personal and professional integrity in accordance with accepted ethical standards.
- A disposition of interest, warmth, and kindness toward people, combined with a high degree of integration and emotional maturity.
- The personal experience of marriage and parenthood, regarded as a decided professional asset.

The National Marriage Guidance Association of Great Britain further noted that marriage and parenthood can be assets in marriage counselling, particularly where the counsellor is in a stable and fulfilling marriage. However, it would be unreasonable and ethically problematic to require the withdrawal of a practitioner's licence solely on the basis of divorce or separation, as such a policy could discourage qualified professionals from remaining in the field.

Challenges from the Home

The personal home environment of the marriage counsellor can also present challenges to the effective discharge of professional duties. Parents-in-law, children, and close acquaintances may place demands on the counsellor for personal favours, gifts, or material support, without regard for the professional obligations and time pressures the counsellor faces. Furthermore, family members may not appreciate the highly sensitive and confidential nature of the cases that marriage counsellors handle. Clients experiencing distress within their marriages often share deeply personal, painful, and private information, which they reasonably expect to be treated with the utmost discretion (Doherty & Harris, 2022).

On the ethical dimensions of confidentiality, Nwadinobi (2019) observed that the counselling relationship is a professional relationship in which the counsellor is ethically bound to maintain confidentiality. Yet, in some households, spouses and family members may press the counsellor to disclose details of cases, particularly where the clients are of the opposite sex. This demand for inappropriate information sharing constitutes a serious ethical challenge in many traditional community settings, and will continue to do so until wider society develops a clearer appreciation of the professional nature of marriage counselling and the ethical obligations it entails.

The maintenance of privacy and confidentiality in marriage counselling is not merely an ethical requirement; it is a practical prerequisite for couples to feel safe enough to seek and engage with counselling services. As Kato (2025) noted, the counsellor has both a moral and a legal obligation to protect client privacy. Information shared in confidence during counselling constitutes privileged communication, and ethical standards require that such information be treated as a trust, not to be disclosed except where there is a clear and imminent danger to an individual or to society.

Sundry Challenges: The Umuada/Umuokpu Group

Additional pressures on the marriage and family counsellor may arise from traditional community organisations. One such group, found primarily in Igbo communities of southeastern Nigeria, is the Umuada or Umuokpu society — an association of married daughters or women of a given village who convene to intervene in difficult marital disputes. According to Obasi and Nnamani (2015), the Umuada society commands considerable authority and respect and is known for its commitment to justice and equity. Their interventions are often resolute and, in some instances, coercive in nature.

Notwithstanding the positive qualities attributed to the Umuada group by some scholars, it must be acknowledged that certain aspects of their approach to marital dispute resolution are inconsistent with the principles underpinning modern marriage counselling. Specific concerns include the following:

- The Umuada intervention model does not accommodate confidentiality, which is a fundamental condition for effective counselling, as it enables couples to disclose sensitive information freely.
- The coercive nature of some Umuada interventions may be regarded as disproportionate and disrespectful of individual autonomy. For example, compelling a wife to carry her belongings on her head and march from her parents' compound to her husband's home amidst public ridicule (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015) constitutes a breach of personal dignity.
- The group's practice of intervening without prior notice or invitation from either party represents an invasion of privacy that is incompatible with contemporary professional standards.
- Such interventions risk causing psychological harm, including trauma, shame, and public humiliation, to the very couple they purport to assist.
- Depending on the circumstances, interventions by the Umuada group may expose individual members and the group collectively to civil or criminal liability for infringement of fundamental human rights, invasion of privacy, or unlawful disclosure of privileged information.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the contextual and systemic barriers that confront marriage and family counselling practice in Nigeria. Key concepts, including marriage and family counselling, environment, and challenge, were defined and contextualised. The marriage counsellor's operational environment encompasses the office setting, the counsellor's own home, the couple's residence, and the broader community. The paper identified and discussed challenges arising from each of these environments, including those related to settings, payment for services, family financial management, professional qualifications and standards, attitudinal maturity, home pressures, and community interference.

Marriage and family counsellors in Nigeria are encouraged to invest continuously in their professional development through training, participation in conferences and workshops, and engagement with current scholarship. Practitioners should not be deterred or intimidated by the challenges described in this paper; rather, persistence, professional commitment, and ethical practice are the foundations upon which the field can grow and achieve greater recognition in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proposed to address the barriers to effective marriage and family counselling practice in Nigeria:

- The Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON), in collaboration with the federal and state governments, should undertake sustained public awareness campaigns through the mass media, religious institutions, hospitals, and community unions to educate Nigerians about the value and importance of professional counselling services in the domain of marriage and family.
- Government at all levels should make adequate budgetary provision for the employment of qualified marriage and family counsellors across their establishments, ministries, parastatals, units, and agencies.
- The Federal and State Ministries of Education should establish minimum qualification requirements for both private and public practice of marriage and family counselling, with the master's degree serving as the recommended professional entry level.

- Regulatory bodies, including CASSON, should actively monitor counselling practice to prevent unqualified practitioners and charlatans from exploiting the field.
- The National Universities Commission (NUC), together with universities and faculties offering programmes in marriage and family counselling, should harmonise their curricula and ensure that training equips graduates to function effectively and ethically in the field.
- Governments at all levels should develop policies requiring intending couples at churches, mosques, and other religious bodies to provide evidence of having undergone psychological assessment and counselling with a qualified marriage counsellor prior to solemnising their marriage, consistent with existing requirements in areas such as HIV/AIDS testing and blood group compatibility.
- Employers in both the private and public sectors should be required, through appropriate legislation, to ensure that employees undergo marriage and family counselling following traumatic events such as accidents, job loss, armed robbery, natural disasters, or bereavement. This measure would help assess employees' psychological readiness to return to work and contribute to a reduction in domestic violence and related incidents.

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