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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES AMONG COUNSELLORS AND PUBLIC OFFICIALS IN OWERRI MUNICIPAL COUNCIL, IMO STATE

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence and Conflict resolution Strategies among counsellors and public officials in Owerri Municipal Council, Imo State. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, involving a population of 300 practicing counsellors, from which a sample of 150 was randomly selected using a stratified sampling technique. Data were collected using a validated structured questionnaire titled “Emotional Intelligence, Conflict Resolution and Counselling Effectiveness Questionnaire (EICRCEQ)”. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, ANOVA, and t-tests, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed. Findings revealed that counsellors exhibited high levels of emotional intelligence, particularly in empathy, self-awareness, and relationship management. EI was found to be significantly and positively correlated with constructive conflict resolution styles (collaboration and compromise) and counselling effectiveness. However, the study also found that formal training in emotional intelligence was lacking among most professionals, despite a strong desire for such training. The study concludes that emotional intelligence is a vital skill in conflict management and counselling. It recommends that emotional intelligence (EI) training should be systematically integrated into professional development programmes, school curricula, and public service policies as a strategic approach to improving conflict management, strengthening interpersonal relationships, enhancing productivity, and promoting emotional well-being across institutions within Owerri Municipal Council.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Conflict Resolution, Counselling, Empathy, Public Institutions, Imo State

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Introduction

Conflicts are an inevitable part of human interaction and organizational life, particularly in diverse and dynamic settings like educational institutions, government councils, and social groups. In the Nigerian context, particularly in urban areas such as Owerri Municipal Council in Imo State,

scholars have identified misunderstandings, communication gaps, cultural diversity, value differences, and emotional mismanagement as contributing factors to conflict situations (Obasi & Nwachukwu, 2022). Unresolved conflicts can lead to tension, reduced productivity, strained relationships, and, in extreme cases, violence or breakdown of institutional functions (Oboegbulem & Alfa, 2018). Counselling, as a professional intervention, plays a critical role in resolving such conflicts by fostering understanding, promoting dialogue, and facilitating personal growth. However, the effectiveness of counselling interventions is largely dependent on the emotional competence of both the counsellor and the individuals involved. This underscores the importance of Emotional Intelligence (EI), a concept that has gained global recognition since the work of Mayer and Salovey (2023), and popularized by Daniel Goleman (2022). EI involves the ability to recognize, understand, manage, and utilize emotions constructively to guide thinking and behavior, particularly in times of stress and conflict. Research has shown that individuals with high emotional intelligence are more capable of navigating interpersonal conflicts, demonstrating empathy, and communicating effectively (Bar-On, 2006; Brackett, Rivers & Salovey, 2019). In conflict-laden environments such as schools and municipal offices, emotionally intelligent behaviour can make the difference between escalation and resolution.

The present study seeks to examine how emotional intelligence can be harnessed for effective conflict resolution and counselling in Owerri Municipal Council. It will explore the levels of EI among counsellors and public officers, the relationship between EI and conflict resolution outcomes, and practical ways to integrate EI training into conflict management and counselling practices. The major concepts that underpin this study are Emotional Intelligence (EI), conflict resolution, and counselling. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, regulate, and utilize one's own emotions as well as those of others to guide thinking and behaviour (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995). It encompasses key components such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, which are essential for effective interpersonal interaction and conflict management. Emotional intelligence is a key variable in this study, as it significantly influences how individuals understand and respond to interpersonal conflicts, as well as how they deliver emotionally responsive counselling services. Individuals with high emotional intelligence are more likely to demonstrate empathy, emotional regulation, and effective communication, which are essential in conflict situations.

Conflict resolution refers to the process through which two or more parties seek to reach a peaceful and mutually acceptable solution to a disagreement or dispute (Deutsch, 2018). The

literature identifies several conflict resolution strategies, including competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating, each varying in levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness (Thomas & Kilmann, 2021). Among these strategies, collaboration is often considered the most constructive approach, as it promotes open communication, mutual

understanding, and sustainable solutions.

Emotional intelligence is a crucial variable in this study because it influences how counsellors respond to clients' emotional needs and interpersonal challenges. Emotionally intelligent counsellors are more effective in building trust, managing emotionally intense counselling sessions, and guiding clients toward healthy and constructive choices. This effectiveness stems from their ability to demonstrate empathy, regulate their emotions, and communicate appropriately within the counselling relationship. According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence enhances interpersonal competence, which is essential for successful counselling and conflict resolution.

Emotional regulation is a fundamental component of emotional intelligence. It refers to the processes through which individuals influence the emotions they experience, the timing of these emotions, and how such emotions are expressed (Gross, 1998). In counselling and conflict resolution settings, emotional regulation enables professionals to remain calm, objective, and supportive, even in highly emotional situations. This ability is particularly important for counsellors and conflict managers, as it helps prevent escalation and promotes constructive engagement between conflicting parties.

This study is anchored on three core psychological and behavioural theories that explain how emotional intelligence influences conflict resolution and counselling effectiveness. The Emotional Intelligence Theory was first proposed by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990), who defined emotional intelligence as the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, discriminate among them, and use this information to guide thinking and actions. The theory was later expanded by Daniel Goleman (1995), who identified five key components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These components are essential for effective interpersonal interaction, making the theory highly relevant to counselling and conflict resolution. The Person-Centered Counselling Theory developed by Carl Rogers (1951) emphasizes empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard as core conditions for effective counselling. The theory posits that individuals are more likely to achieve personal growth when they feel understood and accepted. This perspective aligns closely with emotional intelligence, particularly in the areas of empathy and emotional regulation. It explains why emotionally intelligent counsellors are more effective in creating a safe and supportive environment for clients. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Theory explains the different strategies individuals use in handling conflict, including competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. These strategies vary in terms of assertiveness and cooperativeness. The theory is

relevant to this study because emotional intelligence influences how individuals choose and apply these conflict resolution strategies, particularly the use of collaborative approaches that promote mutual understanding and lasting solutions.

Several empirical studies, both globally and within Nigeria, have examined the relationship

between emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and counselling effectiveness. Afolabi (2017) investigated the role of emotional intelligence in conflict management among Nigerian university students. The findings revealed that students with higher levels of emotional intelligence were significantly more capable of managing interpersonal conflicts constructively. The study recommended the integration of emotional intelligence training into student development and leadership programmes. Ofole and Odusanya (2017) conducted a study in Lagos State to examine the influence of emotional intelligence on counselling performance among secondary school counsellors. The results indicated that counsellors with high emotional intelligence were more effective in establishing therapeutic relationships, managing clients' emotions, and applying appropriate counselling techniques. Ugoani (2020) explored emotional intelligence and conflict management in Nigerian organizations. The study found that individuals with high emotional intelligence demonstrated better conflict management skills, maintained stronger interpersonal relationships, and contributed to improved organizational productivity.

Statement of the Problem

Conflict is an inherent and often unavoidable aspect of human interaction, particularly within social, educational, and organizational settings. In Nigeria, and especially in urban centres such as Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State, conflicts have been reported in schools, workplaces, and community settings among students, teachers, public servants, and other stakeholders (Nwankwo, 2020; Obasi & Nwachukwu, 2022). These conflicts may be associated with factors such as poor emotional regulation, ineffective communication, lack of empathy, and the use of inappropriate conflict resolution strategies. When not effectively managed, such conflicts can result in strained relationships, reduced productivity, and psychological distress. Although counselling services and conflict resolution mechanisms exist in many schools and public institutions, studies suggest that these interventions do not always produce optimal outcomes (Ofole & Odusanya, 2017). This limitation may be linked to insufficient emphasis on emotional intelligence competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, which are essential for constructive conflict management. Emotional intelligence, as established in the literature, enhances individuals' ability to understand and regulate emotions, improve communication, and facilitate peaceful resolution of disputes (Salovey & Mayer, 1997; Goleman, 1995). However, within the context of Owerri Municipal Council, there appears to be limited empirical evidence on the extent to which emotional intelligence is integrated into counselling practices and conflict resolution processes. It is also unclear whether counsellors and administrative personnel possess adequate training in emotional intelligence, particularly in

managing emotionally charged situations. This gap underscores the need for further investigation into how emotional intelligence can be harnessed to improve counselling effectiveness and conflict resolution outcomes in the area.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict resolution strategies of counsellors and administrative officials in Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- ◆ Assess the level of emotional intelligence among counsellors and administrative officials.
- ◆ Investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and the conflict resolution strategies employed by counsellors and administrative officials.
- ◆ Examine the contribution of emotional intelligence to counselling effectiveness, particularly in addressing emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal challenges among students and public officials.
- ◆ Explore the extent to which emotional intelligence training and awareness are integrated into the professional development programs of educators, counsellors, and public officials in Owerri Municipal Council.

Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the investigation into the role of emotional intelligence in conflict resolution and counselling within Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State:

- ◆ What is the level of emotional intelligence among counsellors and administrative officials in Owerri Municipal Council?
- ◆ How does emotional intelligence influence the conflict resolution strategies employed by counsellors and administrative officials?
- ◆ To what extent does emotional intelligence affect the effectiveness of counselling practices in addressing emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal challenges?
- ◆ What is the level of awareness and integration of emotional intelligence training in the professional development programs of educators, counsellors, and public officials in Owerri Municipal Council?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated in line with the research questions to be tested statistically in the course of the study:

H₀₁: There is no significant level of emotional intelligence among counsellors and administrative officials in Owerri Municipal Council.

H₀₂: Emotional intelligence does not significantly influence the conflict resolution strategies employed by counsellors and administrative officials.

H₀₃: Emotional intelligence does not significantly affect the effectiveness of counselling practices in addressing emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal challenges.

H₀₄: There is no significant level of awareness and integration of emotional intelligence training in the professional development programs of educators, counsellors, and administrative officials in Owerri Municipal Council.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design with a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques. This design was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to collect and analyze data from participants in their natural settings without manipulating variables, while also exploring participants' perceptions and experiences in depth. The target population for the study comprised all professional counsellors and administrative officials working in public secondary schools and governmental institutions within Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State. According to official records from the Imo State Ministry of Education and Local Government Service Commission (2024), the population consisted of approximately 300 registered professionals, including full-time school counsellors and governmental welfare officers. From this population, a sample of 150 participants was drawn, representing 50% of the population, which is considered statistically adequate for survey research (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970). A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure fair representation across institutional roles, gender, and years of professional experience, thereby accounting for potential differences in emotional intelligence levels and conflict resolution practices.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled the Emotional Intelligence, Conflict Resolution, and Counselling Effectiveness Questionnaire (EICRCEQ), developed by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Section A captured demographic information such as age, gender, institution type, years of experience, and training in emotional intelligence. Section B, the Emotional Intelligence Scale, contained 20 items adapted from Goleman's Emotional Competency Framework and the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), measuring self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness (empathy), and relationship management on a five-point Likert scale. Section C, the Conflict Resolution Style Inventory, consisted of 15 items based on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), assessing respondents' preferred conflict management styles: Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating. Section D, the Counselling Effectiveness Inventory, included 15 items assessing counselling performance, focusing on quality of interactions, management of clients' emotions, problem-solving abilities, and session impact, also rated on a five-point scale. The draft instrument was subjected to content and face validation by

three experts in educational psychology and measurement, and subsequently pilot-tested on 30 counsellors outside the study area. Reliability analysis yielded high Cronbach's alpha coefficients: Emotional Intelligence ($\alpha = 0.88$), Conflict Resolution ($\alpha = 0.84$), and Counselling Effectiveness ($\alpha = 0.86$), indicating strong internal consistency.

For the qualitative component, structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with counsellors, teachers, and administrative officials to gain deeper insights into the application of emotional intelligence in counselling and conflict resolution. The discussions explored real-life conflict cases, use of emotional intelligence in interventions, challenges faced, and areas needing further training or support. All sessions were recorded with consent, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes.

The questionnaires were distributed to a cross-section of participants in selected schools and government offices. Out of 150 questionnaires distributed, 138 were fully completed, yielding a 92% response rate, while incomplete responses were discarded. Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize demographic information, emotional intelligence levels, conflict resolution styles, and counselling effectiveness. Inferential statistics included Independent Samples t-tests, One-Way ANOVA, and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, applied to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 significance level. The t-test compared participants with and without emotional intelligence training (HO4), ANOVA compared EI levels across different professional groups (HO1), and Pearson correlation examined the relationships between emotional intelligence and conflict resolution strategies (HO2) as well as counselling effectiveness (HO3). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to complement the quantitative findings and provide richer understanding of how emotional intelligence is applied in real-life counselling and conflict resolution scenarios.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the level of emotional intelligence among counsellors in Owerri Municipal Council?

Emotional Intelligence Components	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Self-awareness	4.12	0.53	High
Self-regulation	3.89	0.61	Moderate-High
Empathy (social awareness)	4.05	0.58	High
Relationship management	3.91	0.66	Moderate-High
Overall EI Score	4.00	0.59	High

The results indicate that respondents have a generally high level of emotional intelligence, with strong abilities in self-awareness and empathy. However, self-regulation and relationship

management are slightly lower, suggesting some room for improvement in managing emotions and interpersonal relationships.

Research Question 2: How does emotional intelligence influence conflict resolution strategies adopted by school counsellors and public officials?

Conflict Resolution Style	Mean Score	Relationship with EI (r)	Significance (p)	Interpretation
Collaborating	4.21	0.68	0.000	Strong positive
Compromising	3.90	0.61	0.000	Moderate positive
Avoiding	2.22	-0.35	0.003	Weak negative

Emotional intelligence is significantly and positively related to the use of collaborative and compromising conflict resolution strategies.

Research Question 3: To what extent does emotional intelligence affect the effectiveness of counselling practices?

Counselling Effectiveness	Variable	Correlation with EI (r)	p-value	Interpretation
Managing client emotions		0.73	0.000	Strong positive relationship
Building therapeutic relationships		0.69	0.000	Strong positive relationship
Problem-solving in sessions		0.64	0.000	Moderate-strong positive

High emotional intelligence significantly enhances counselling effectiveness across multiple dimensions.

Research Question 4: What is the level of integration of emotional intelligence training in professional development programs?

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Have you received formal training on EI?	36%	64%
Is EI included in your professional development?	29%	71%
Would you like training in emotional intelligence?	88%	12%

Majority of the respondents have not received formal EI training, indicating a gap in professional development.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Result	Decision
H ₀₁	ANOVA	F(2,147) = 4.76, p < 0.05	Rejected

H ₀₂	Pearson Correlation	$r = 0.68, p = 0.000$	Rejected
H ₀₃	Pearson Correlation	$r = 0.73, p = 0.000$	Rejected
H ₀₄	t-test	$t(136) = 3.29, p = 0.001$	Rejected

The table shows that all the null hypotheses were rejected, indicating statistically significant results. Specifically, the ANOVA result suggests significant differences among groups, while the Pearson correlation results ($r = 0.68$ and $r = 0.73$) indicate strong positive relationships between the variables. Additionally, the t-test result confirms a significant difference between the compared groups.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study have provided valuable insights into how emotional intelligence (EI) influences conflict resolution and counselling effectiveness in educational and public institutions within Owerri Municipal Council. The discussion is organized according to the research questions and hypotheses.

Level of Emotional Intelligence among Respondents

The results indicated that the counsellors in Owerri Municipal Council exhibited a generally high level of emotional intelligence, particularly in self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management. This aligns with previous research by Adeyemo and Ogunyemi (2020) and Oginska-Bulik (2020) who found that professionals with higher EI levels are better equipped to manage their own emotions and understand those of others, which is essential in emotionally charged situations like conflict resolution and counselling. This high EI level, however, contrasts with the finding that most participants had not received formal EI training, suggesting that much of their emotional competence may stem from personal experiences or informal learning. This points to a need for institutionalized emotional intelligence training to further strengthen these natural capacities.

Influence of Emotional Intelligence on Conflict Resolution Strategies

The findings revealed a strong positive correlation between emotional intelligence and the use of collaborative and compromising conflict resolution strategies. Respondents with higher EI scores were more likely to resolve disputes constructively by engaging in open communication, empathy, and mutual understanding. This confirms earlier empirical studies, such as Afolabi (2021) and Ugoani (2016), which demonstrated that emotionally intelligent individuals tend to avoid aggressive or avoidant conflict styles, preferring instead to seek win-win outcomes. The low

mean score for avoidant strategies among participants further supports the conclusion that EI encourages active engagement in resolving disputes rather than withdrawing or escalating tensions.

Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Counselling Effectiveness

A significant positive relationship was found between emotional intelligence and key indicators of counselling effectiveness, including empathy, emotional regulation, and client engagement. This supports the work of Ofole and Odusanya (2019) and Nelson et al. (2020), who emphasized the importance of EI in building trust, understanding client needs, and creating a therapeutic environment conducive to problem-solving. The results suggest that counsellors with higher emotional intelligence are better able to: Build rapport with clients/students, Navigate emotionally intense conversations, Guide clients toward realistic and emotionally sound decisions. This finding underscores the role of EI not just in conflict prevention, but also in therapeutic intervention and rehabilitation.

Integration of Emotional Intelligence Training

Despite the high levels of EI observed, the majority of participants reported that they had not undergone formal emotional intelligence training, and that EI concepts were not well integrated into professional development programs. However, a large percentage expressed interest in receiving such training, indicating a gap in institutional capacity building and a willingness to improve. This is consistent with findings by Eze and Eze (2019), who reported that structured EI training significantly improves interpersonal skills and conflict resolution outcomes among school personnel. The lack of formal training may limit the potential of otherwise capable counsellors, especially in more complex conflict or crisis situations.

Counselling Implications

The results of this study have several implications for counselling practice in Owerri Municipal and beyond:

Effective counselling practice requires deliberate and sustained investment in the emotional intelligence of professionals. Counsellors should be provided with structured and continuous training that equips them to understand and manage the emotional complexities that arise in client interactions and conflict situations. Beyond in-service training, emotional intelligence should be embedded as a core component of counsellor education programmes so that emerging professionals enter the field with a solid emotional and interpersonal foundation.

In addition, attention must be given to cultural sensitivity. Counsellors need to be adequately prepared to recognize how cultural beliefs, values, and social norms shape emotional expression and influence approaches to conflict resolution within the Nigerian context. This understanding will enable them to respond more appropriately and effectively to clients from diverse backgrounds. Institutional support is also essential. Schools, government agencies, and

counselling centres have a responsibility to create enabling environments by investing in emotional intelligence training and providing the necessary support systems for counsellors to perform optimally. When such support is in place, counsellors are better positioned to build strong therapeutic relationships characterized by trust, empathy, and openness, which ultimately leads to

more positive counselling outcomes.

Conclusion

This study underscores the central importance of emotional intelligence in promoting effective conflict resolution and counselling practice among counsellors in Owerri Municipal Council, Imo State. Rather than merely describing outcomes, the study establishes emotional intelligence as a critical factor that shapes how counsellors respond to interpersonal challenges, manage emotions, and facilitate positive change in others. It highlights that the ability to understand and regulate emotions, demonstrate empathy, and maintain healthy relationships is fundamental to achieving meaningful and lasting resolutions in conflict situations.

Furthermore, the study affirms that emotional intelligence goes beyond being an individual trait; it is a professional competence that directly impacts the quality of counselling services and organizational harmony. Counsellors who demonstrate strong emotional intelligence are better equipped to create supportive environments, encourage open communication, and guide individuals toward constructive behavioural outcomes. Therefore, the study concludes that strengthening emotional intelligence among counsellors is essential for improving counselling effectiveness, fostering peaceful coexistence, and enhancing overall institutional functioning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to improve conflict resolution and counselling effectiveness through the application of emotional intelligence within Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State:

- ◆ Although counsellors showed a high level of emotional intelligence, targeted training should be provided to improve self-regulation and relationship management skills.
- ◆ Counsellors and public officials should be trained to adopt more collaborative and compromising strategies, as these are positively influenced by emotional intelligence.
- ◆ Emotional intelligence should be strengthened as a core professional skill to enhance counsellors' ability to manage client emotions, build relationships, and solve problems effectively.
- ◆ Emotional intelligence training should be formally incorporated into professional development programmes, since many respondents have not received such training despite its importance.

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**PRE-AND POST-MARITAL COUNSELLING AS A PANACEA FOR
CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG NEWLY MARRIED ADULTS IN
UMUAHIA NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, ABIA STATE**