

INTEGRATING OF NEGOTIATION SKILLS INTO COUNSELLING EDUCATION: A TOOL FOR EMPOWERING FUTURE COUNSELLORS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The counselling profession in Nigeria is undergoing a significant transformation in response to the country's evolving socio-political, economic, and cultural landscape. Contemporary counselors are now expected to transcend traditional therapeutic boundaries and function as mediators, advocates, problem-solvers, and community leaders in complex environments such as schools, hospitals, IDP camps, correctional institutions, and conflict-affected communities. However, Nigerian counselor education programs remain largely rooted in outdated curricular models that emphasize theoretical knowledge while neglecting critical practical skills like negotiation. Drawing upon Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory and John Paul Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory, the paper underscores the theoretical relevance of negotiation to the counseling profession. It identifies negotiation as a vital interpersonal competence encompassing active listening, emotional intelligence, assertive communication, problem-solving, and advocacy skills essential for counselors operating in diverse, high-stakes, and multicultural contexts. Despite its significance, negotiation remains conspicuously absent in Nigeria's counseling curricula, leading to a skills gap that undermines counselor efficacy in real-world practice. The study highlights current deficiencies in counselor education such as a lack of negotiation-focused courses, insufficient experiential learning opportunities, and limited interdisciplinary collaboration. It also presents compelling justifications for integrating negotiation training, including the enhancement of professional competence, empowerment of counselors, promotion of client-centered outcomes, and contribution to peace-building in conflict-prone communities. To address these gaps, the paper recommends strategies such as curriculum reform, performance-based assessments, faculty development, collaboration with allied disciplines, and pilot programs. Challenges such as curricular rigidity, lack of trained faculty, and cultural resistance are acknowledged, alongside actionable solutions involving collaboration with professional bodies like APROCON CASSON and the NUC.

Keywords: Counsellor Education, Negotiation Skills, Professional Competence, Curriculum Reform, Conflict Transformation, Empowerment, Nigeria.

Introduction

Counselling as a profession in Nigeria is currently experiencing a significant paradigm shift in response to evolving social, economic, and institutional dynamics (Egbochuku & Obot, 2017). Traditionally, the role of the counsellor was narrowly defined, primarily centered on providing empathetic listening, offering guidance, and delivering emotional support to clients in distress. However, the growing complexity of societal issues ranging from domestic violence and youth delinquency to mental health crises, educational inequality, and workplace stress has necessitated a redefinition of this professional scope. In today's context, counsellors are increasingly expected to serve as multifunctional agents who not only offer psychological support but also engage in advocacy, mediation, community outreach, and leadership roles within institutional and social frameworks (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2015).

Nigerian Counsellors are now found working across a broad spectrum of environments, including schools, hospitals, correctional institutions, rehabilitation centers, internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, and communities plagued by ethno-religious conflict and poverty. These settings expose counselors to high-stakes, high-pressure situations that demand more than traditional therapeutic rapport they require proficiency in conflict resolution, negotiation, strategic communication, and systemic intervention (Ugwoke, 2019). Such environments present challenges that go beyond individual client issues, often involving complex stakeholder interests and structural barriers that necessitate the counsellor's ability to broker agreements, mediate disputes, and advocate for resources or policy change.

Despite these expanding roles, most counsellor training institutions in Nigeria continue to operate within outdated curricular frameworks that prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical competencies. As a result, there is insufficient emphasis on equipping counsellors with essential 21st-century skills such as negotiation, conflict management, advocacy, and leadership (Okoye & Okezie, 2021). Many programs offer little to no formal instruction in these areas, leaving graduates ill-prepared to function effectively in today's challenging and dynamic professional landscape. This seminar paper, therefore, makes a compelling case for the intentional and systematic integration of negotiation skills into counsellor education in Nigeria.

Counselling Education

Counselling education refers to the formalized academic and professional training process designed to prepare individuals for competent and ethical practice in the counselling profession. It encompasses a structured curriculum that integrates theoretical knowledge, skill acquisition, ethical orientation, and supervised practical experience to ensure the development of well-rounded professionals (Gladding, 2018). The overarching goal is to equip future counsellors with the tools necessary to facilitate psychological growth, emotional resilience, and personal development in diverse client populations.

In Nigeria, counselling education is primarily offered at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels within universities and colleges of education. These programs are typically housed in departments such as Guidance and Counselling, Educational Foundations, Educational

Psychology, or Human Development Studies (Adegoke, 2015). The academic content is designed to cover a range of foundational and applied courses, including counseling theories and techniques, human development, assessment and testing, ethics, group counseling, school and vocational counselling, and supervised internship or practicum.

Despite the apparent robustness of this curricular structure, recent evaluations indicate that Nigerian counselling education remains largely anchored in traditional, reactive models that are increasingly misaligned with contemporary global practices and societal demands (Aduke, 2020). The curricula tend to focus heavily on classroom-based theoretical instruction with minimal emphasis on applied competencies such as digital literacy, trauma-informed care, social justice advocacy, multicultural responsiveness, and, critically, negotiation and conflict resolution skills (Nwankwo & Okonkwo, 2018). These omissions have resulted in a significant gap between counselor training and real-world professional expectations, particularly in complex environments where counsellors must navigate multifaceted interpersonal and institutional challenges.

One of the key factors contributing to this stagnation is the continued reliance on the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) set by the National Universities Commission (NUC). While these standards were initially designed to ensure uniformity and quality in higher education programs across Nigeria, they have not undergone significant updates to reflect emerging trends in mental health education, technological integration, or global best practices in counsellor training (NUC, 2015). As such, many institutions follow outdated templates that prioritize academic theory over practical, interdisciplinary, and experiential learning.

Furthermore, the lack of interdisciplinary collaboration between counselling education and other related fields such as law, public health, peace studies, conflict resolution, political science, and community development has further narrowed the scope of training provided to student counsellors (Amadi, 2020). In a world where counsellors must often work with diverse stakeholders, negotiate institutional protocols, and advocate for systemic change, the absence of cross-sectoral exposure is a critical shortcoming. Students are rarely provided opportunities to engage in real-life simulations, mock negotiation exercises, or community-based conflict mediation programs, all of which are essential for developing negotiation and advocacy competencies.

Additionally, faculty shortages in specialized areas such as mediation, peace building, negotiation, and policy advocacy represent another major constraint. Many counselling educators in Nigeria were trained under the same traditional system and may lack the expertise or professional development opportunities needed to incorporate newer instructional content into their teaching (Oloruntimehin & Falaye, 2016). This limitation often leads to resistance to curricular reform, as well as a lack of innovation in teaching methods, assessment strategies, and

interdisciplinary course design.

The cumulative effect of these challenges is a counselling education system that produces graduates who are theoretically knowledgeable but practically underprepared for the demands of contemporary practice. As Nigerian society becomes more complex characterized by political instability, ethno-religious tensions, economic inequality, domestic violence, and mental health crises there is a growing need for counsellors who are not only empathic listeners but also effective negotiators, proactive leaders, and change agents. Unfortunately, the current structure of counsellor education in Nigeria falls short of producing professionals who can meet this challenge.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive overhaul of the counselling curriculum in Nigeria. This includes revising the BMAS to reflect global competencies, strengthening faculty capacity in emerging domains, incorporating interdisciplinary collaboration, and embedding critical skills such as negotiation, strategic communication, leadership, and systemic advocacy into the core of counsellor education. Only through such deliberate transformation can Nigeria begin to produce a new generation of counsellors capable of addressing both individual and systemic issues with skill, confidence, and cultural competence.

Negotiation Skills

Negotiation is widely recognized as a fundamental process of strategic communication through which two or more individuals or parties seek to resolve disagreements, manage conflicts, or arrive at decisions that are mutually acceptable and beneficial (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011). It involves the application of various interpersonal, emotional, cognitive, and communicative competencies aimed at balancing interests, maintaining relationships, and fostering collaboration. Negotiation is not simply about winning or compromising—it is about understanding underlying needs, managing power dynamics, and creatively exploring options that promote shared understanding and satisfaction.

In its broader context, negotiation is not confined to formal settings such as business deals or political mediation. It is an everyday social process that occurs in a variety of human interactions between parents and children, teachers and students, employers and employees, or counsellors and clients. The principles of negotiation are increasingly relevant in the helping professions, especially counseling, where relationships are central, and decisions often have significant personal, social, or ethical implications (Lewicki, Barry, & Saunders, 2016).

Effective negotiation requires a variety of soft skills, including but not limited to:

- (a) **Active Listening:** the ability to attentively hear, interpret, and validate the concerns of the other party, which helps build trust and clarity;
- (b) **Emotional Intelligence:** the capacity to recognize, regulate, and respond to one's own emotions and those of others in ways that promote empathy and composure (Goleman, 1998);

- (c) Assertive Communication:** expressing one's needs and viewpoints clearly and respectfully without undermining others;
- (d) Persuasion and Influence:** the ability to shape opinions and outcomes through logical reasoning, credible information, and respectful engagement;
- (e) Problem-Solving and Compromise:** working collaboratively to identify win-win outcomes, even in complex or emotionally charged situations;
- (f) Boundary Setting:** defining acceptable limits in interpersonal and professional relationships to maintain respect and ethical standards.

In the field of counseling, negotiation is especially vital because counselors frequently work in emotionally delicate environments, mediating between clients and their families, schools, employers, or healthcare providers. For example, a school counselor may need to negotiate with a teacher and parents regarding a student's behavioral plan. A rehabilitation counselor may need to negotiate with an employer on behalf of a client with a disability to secure reasonable workplace accommodations. Similarly, in trauma or crisis counselling, professionals may negotiate with stakeholders to provide timely and appropriate interventions for vulnerable populations.

Moreover, counsellors often serve as advocates for social justice, equity, and inclusion. In such roles, negotiation becomes a key mechanism for confronting systemic barriers, mobilizing support, and facilitating institutional change. Whether working within educational institutions, hospitals, correctional facilities, or community development programs, the ability to negotiate strategically empowers counselors to amplify their clients' voices and secure essential resources and opportunities.

Despite its importance, negotiation has not been adequately emphasized in traditional counsellor education programs, particularly in Nigeria and other developing contexts. Most counselor training curricula focus predominantly on intrapersonal techniques such as empathy, reflection, and active listening while neglecting the interpersonal dynamics and conflict-resolution frameworks needed in real-world settings (Okoye & Okezie, 2021). Without structured exposure to negotiation models and practical exercises, emerging counsellors may lack the confidence and skill set required to navigate the complex power relations and multi-stakeholder interactions that characterize many counseling environments.

Integrating negotiation training into counselor education is therefore not just beneficial—it is essential. Such training should include role-playing simulations, case studies, interdisciplinary workshops, and collaboration with professionals from law, peace studies, and public policy. Through these strategies, future counsellors can acquire the practical negotiation competencies that will enable them to act as effective mediators, advocates, and leaders in diverse socio-cultural settings.

Empowerment of Future Counsellors

Empowerment, in the context of counsellor education, refers to the deliberate process of enhancing individuals' autonomy, competence, and critical awareness while equipping them with the skills and confidence needed to influence decisions and create meaningful change within their professional and social environments (Wallerstein, 2020; Messman et al., 2022). For future counsellors, empowerment extends beyond the mere acquisition of theoretical knowledge—it encompasses the development of practical competencies, critical thinking, ethical judgment, and the ability to advocate for both individual clients and systemic improvements.

In modern counseling practice, especially within culturally diverse and socio-politically complex contexts like Nigeria, the role of the counselor has expanded considerably. No longer are counselors viewed merely as passive listeners or empathetic confidants. Instead, they are increasingly expected to serve as change agents, community leaders, advocates for marginalized groups, and policy influencers (Lambie & Milsom, 2010). To fulfill these evolving responsibilities, future counselors must be empowered through a holistic educational process that integrates not just counseling techniques, but also leadership development, negotiation strategies, and policy awareness.

Negotiation skills play a central role in this empowerment process. Counsellors frequently work in environments where multiple stakeholders' students, parents, administrators, government agencies, healthcare providers, and community leaders must collaborate to support clients' well-being. In such settings, the counselor must often mediate differing interests, resolve conflicts, and advocate for fair and inclusive solutions. Negotiation skills enable counselors to navigate these dynamics with professionalism and assertiveness while remaining client-centered and ethically grounded.

Furthermore, empowerment through negotiation training encourages counselors to move from being reactive service providers to proactive facilitators of change. For instance, a counsellor trained in negotiation is better positioned to secure resources for under-served populations, push for reforms in school policies affecting student mental health, or mediate in family and community disputes. In this way, empowerment becomes both an outcome and a tool: it is the end result of effective counsellor education and the means through which counselors enact transformative change in society.

In multicultural and often volatile environments such as those found in many Nigerian communities, empowerment is not a luxury it is a necessity. Future counsellors must be equipped to engage constructively with issues such as poverty, inter-ethnic tensions, gender-based violence, and educational inequality. These challenges demand more than empathy; they require strategic thinking, collaborative problem-solving, and the confidence to lead conversations that result in tangible improvements in people's lives.

Unfortunately, the current counseling education framework in Nigeria has not fully embraced this broader vision of empowerment. As several studies have noted (Ugwoke, 2019;

Okoye & Okezie, 2021), many institutions continue to prioritize traditional models of counsellor preparation, with limited exposure to contemporary leadership or negotiation frameworks. Ultimately, empowering future counsellors through negotiation and leadership training ensures that they are not just helpers but advocates, bridge-builders, and change-makers who can navigate complexity with confidence and make a lasting impact in their communities.

Theoretical Review

Humanistic Theory (Carl Rogers)

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory, also known as Client-Centered Therapy, is one of the most influential models in the field of counseling and psychotherapy. Developed in the mid-20th century, this theory emphasizes the inherent worth of individuals and the belief that every person possesses the capacity for self-understanding, growth, and self-directed change (Rogers, 1951). Central to Rogers' theory are three foundational conditions: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence (authenticity). These core elements foster a therapeutic environment in which clients feel safe, valued, and understood in an environment conducive to meaningful transformation.

The relevance of Rogers' humanistic principles extends far beyond traditional therapy rooms and can be powerfully applied to the realm of negotiation, particularly within counseling contexts. Negotiation, like client-centered therapy, is fundamentally a relational process that relies on understanding others' needs, establishing trust, and collaboratively reaching outcomes that respect the dignity and values of all parties involved.

At the heart of both effective counseling and successful negotiation lies empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings and perspectives of another person. In humanistic counseling, empathy allows counselors to "enter the client's frame of reference" and see the world as the client sees it. This same empathic posture is essential in negotiation settings, where understanding the motivations, fears, and desires of the other party helps foster common ground and reduce defensiveness. When counsellors engage in negotiation whether advocating for a client's needs, mediating disputes, or collaborating with other professionals, empathic communication enables them to de-escalate tensions and promote cooperative dialogue.

Similarly, unconditional positive regard, which refers to the non-judgmental acceptance and respect for clients regardless of their actions or decisions, mirrors the foundational requirement in negotiation of mutual respect. Negotiation is not about domination or coercion but about valuing diverse opinions and working constructively through differences. When counsellors model unconditional positive regard, they are more likely to influence stakeholders positively, foster a sense of psychological safety, and open the door for transparent discussions.

The third key principle, congruence, or the counsellor's authenticity and genuineness, also plays a vital role in negotiation. Authenticity builds credibility and trust, which are critical in any negotiation process. When counsellors approach negotiation with sincerity, clarity, and consistency between their words and actions, they are more likely to be seen as trustworthy

partners. This trust enhances the likelihood of reaching agreements that are not only practical but also ethically sound and emotionally acceptable to all parties involved.

Furthermore, the humanistic approach emphasizes collaboration and self-determination, encouraging clients to take an active role in their healing and decision-making. This orientation aligns seamlessly with interest-based negotiation, a style of negotiation that focuses on underlying needs and mutual interests rather than rigid positions. In this sense, both humanistic counseling and negotiation prioritize dialogue over debate, understanding over judgment, and solutions over blame.

In multicultural, institutional, or community counseling settings—where negotiation may involve families, school administrators, religious leaders, or government officials—applying humanistic principles ensures that the counselor remains ethically grounded and person-centered, even when navigating complex systems. This humanistic lens ensures that negotiation does not become a tool for manipulation or control, but rather a means of empowering individuals and communities through respectful and meaningful engagement. Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory offers a powerful theoretical foundation for understanding and implementing negotiation skills within counseling practice. Its emphasis on empathy, respect, authenticity, and collaborative problem-solving makes it especially relevant in training future counsellors to become effective negotiators, advocates, and facilitators of change.

Conflict Transformation Theory (John Paul Lederach)

John Paul Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory offers a profound approach to understanding and managing conflicts, particularly in settings characterized by deep-rooted social divisions, historical grievances, or systemic injustice. Unlike traditional models of conflict resolution, which often focus on ending conflict through immediate settlement or compromise, Lederach (2003) advocates for a transformative approach. This approach goes beyond merely resolving disputes; it seeks to address the underlying causes of conflict, heal fractured relationships, and build sustainable peace through a long-term, holistic process.

At the core of conflict transformation is the belief that conflict is not inherently negative but can serve as a catalyst for positive social change if handled constructively. According to Lederach, transformation involves reshaping the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of conflict. This process requires developing new patterns of interaction, creating inclusive dialogue platforms, and fostering a shared sense of justice and community. It encourages participants to move beyond adversarial thinking and toward mutual understanding, empathy, and collective problem-solving.

This theoretical perspective has direct implications for counseling, especially in multicultural, trauma-impacted, and post-conflict environments. Counsellors trained in conflict transformation are better equipped to navigate complex interpersonal or group dynamics, mediate emotional tensions, and facilitate healing processes among individuals or communities.

In such contexts, negotiation skills are essential tools. They enable counselors to broker

agreements between conflicting parties, advocate for marginalized clients, and help rebuild trust in environments marked by fear, anger, or social fragmentation.

Furthermore, integrating negotiation training within counselling education aligns with the transformative mission of both counselling and peace building. Counsellors can act as peace agents, not only providing emotional support but also guiding clients through the difficult work of reconciliation and systemic change. As McLeod (2019) argues, the counsellor's role in a modern, socially complex world includes promoting justice, equity, and healing - values that are central to Lederach's framework.

Relevance of Negotiation Skills in Counselling Practice

Negotiation is central to counselling in numerous domains:

- ◆ **Conflict Resolution:** Counsellors often mediate disputes between clients and third parties. Effective negotiation ensures durable and peaceful outcomes (Okoye & Okezie, 2021).
- ◆ **Advocacy and Social Justice:** Negotiation empowers counsellors to advocate for underserved clients, including survivors of abuse or people with disabilities (Lambie & Milsom, 2010).
- ◆ **Career and Workplace Counselling:** Career guidance involves mediating between employer expectations and individual aspirations. Negotiation enables win-win outcomes (Corey et al., 2015).
- ◆ **Family and Marital Counselling:** Negotiation reduces hostility and builds consensus in sessions addressing sensitive issues like parenting or infidelity (Gladding, 2018).
- ◆ **School Counselling:** In educational settings, negotiation is vital for resolving conflicts involving students, parents, and school administrators (Egbochuku & Obot, 2017).

Current Gaps in Counselling Education in Nigeria

Despite efforts to improve counselling education, Nigerian programs lack:

- ◆ Negotiation-specific courses
- ◆ Field-based conflict resolution experience
- ◆ Interdisciplinary exposure (Amadi, 2020)
- ◆ Experiential learning environments
- ◆ Faculty trained in peace studies or mediation (Oloruntimehin & Falaye, 2016)
- ◆ These deficiencies reduce the readiness of counselling graduates to serve in diverse and demanding roles.

Justification for Integrating Negotiation Skills

- ◆ **Empowering Counsellors:** Counsellors gain confidence and capacity to operate in high-stakes interpersonal and institutional settings (Zimmerman, 2000).

- ◆ **Improving Client Outcomes:** Negotiation leads to collaborative decision-making and sustainable client outcomes (Fisher et al., 2011).
- ◆ **Promoting Social Cohesion:** Negotiation-trained counselors can act as peacebuilders in conflict-prone communities (Lederach, 2003).
- ◆ **Enhancing Professional Competency:** Negotiation skills broaden career prospects and improve interdisciplinary collaboration (Lambie & Milsom, 2010).

Strategies for Integration

- ◆ **Curriculum Development:** Introduce negotiation-specific modules or embed negotiation in courses like ethics, multicultural counselling, and family therapy (Aduke, 2020).
- ◆ **Experiential Learning:** Utilize role-plays, real-life simulations, and community-based practicum (Okoye & Okezie, 2021).
- ◆ **Collaborative Teaching:** Invite co-facilitators from peace studies, law, and public health to deliver interdisciplinary modules (Amadi, 2020).
- ◆ **Assessment and Evaluation:** Incorporate performance-based assessments such as negotiation simulations, reflective journals, and video analysis.

Challenges to Integration

- ◆ **Curriculum rigidity** due to bureaucratic inertia (NUC, 2015)
- ◆ **Lack of trained faculty** in negotiation and mediation (Oloruntimehin & Falaye, 2016)
- ◆ **Resource constraints** for simulations and training tools (Adegoke, 2015)
- ◆ **Cultural resistance** to skill-based reform in academia (Amadi, 2020)

Suggestions

1. Engage CASSON, NUC, and stakeholders to mandate negotiation training in counsellor education.
2. Facilitate workshops for counsellor educators.
3. Collaborate with NGOs and international bodies for funding and curriculum design.
4. Promote studies evaluating the effectiveness of negotiation in counselling outcomes.
5. Implement pilot negotiation modules in select universities.

Conclusion

The integration of negotiation skills into counsellor education is not merely a pedagogical enhancement; it is a strategic necessity. As Nigeria faces increasing complexity in its socio-political landscape, future counsellors must evolve from passive listeners to active mediators and advocates. Embedding negotiation into counsellor training programs will empower a new generation of professionals who are capable of leading change, fostering peace, and promoting client well-being in multifaceted settings.

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