INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL STIGMA AND FEAR OF SELF-DISCLOSURE ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF COUNSELLING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN EMOHUA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

Dr. Bruno U. Onyekuru

Department of Educational Psychology,
Guidance and Councelling, Faculty of Education,
University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: *Fear of self-disclosure and social stigma are social factors that may possibly influence perception about counselling, acceptance of counselling and willingness to access counselling. This study therefore investigated the influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on students' perception of counselling among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. It is a correlational study involving a sample of 798 SS2 and SS3 students drawn from a population of 2529 SS2 and SS3 students in public secondary schools in Emohua Local Government of Rivers State. The sampling techniques employed are a combination of simple random sampling and proportionate stratified random sampling techniques. The instrument for data collection is Social Stigma, Fear of Self-Disclosure and Students' Counselling Perception Questionnaire which was vetted by specialists in Counselling Psychology. Its reliability coefficients obtained through Cronbach alpha technique ranged from 0.71 to 0.86. The results of the study revealed that fear of self-disclosure has a negative and significant influence on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. Social stigma also has a negative and significant influence on counselling perception among the students. It was therefore recommended that counsellors should uphold the tenets of their profession about confidentiality in handling matters concerning the clients by ensuring that personal information provided by counsellees is not divulge to other people. Students should cease seeing colleagues who seek for counselling as degenerate and irresponsible, but should encourage one another to access counselling when the need arises.*

KEYWORDS: Self-disclosure, social stigma, self-concealment, counselling, life problems, self-concealment, advice and perception.

INTRODUCTION

Counselling was defined by Onyekuru (2010) as assistance given by a specialist during which the beneficiary receives informed advice intended to address life problems including mental illness, marital conflicts, substance abuse, sleeplessness, low school performance, bereavement or some other matters impacting on the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals and the family. It is an informed advice given by a trained expert (counsellor) to someone needing assistance (counsellee) during which the problems of the counsellee including psychological, academic, interpersonal/social, and family problems are

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identified and solutions proffered. Counselling is a specialized discipline with various concerns, programmes and services which assist individuals understand themselves, their problems, their academic environment, and to develop capacity for wise decision making (Eyo, Joshua & Esuong, 2012).

Counselling perception is the process of interpreting information and forming images of counselling programmes (Lahey, 2003). It is also the awareness, views, opinions or beliefs one has about counselling. Counselling perception is acquired and shaped by memories, motivations, emotions and experiences (Lahey, 2003). So, when students interact with their peers, teachers and other people at homes or in schools, they are exposed to a wide range of experiences obtainable from the notions, views and beliefs of teachers and students about counselling which help them to form different perceptions about counselling. Students' self-concept formation arises from beliefs and perceptions of external world, learnt through their experiences at home and school and through other means of socialization. So, family and school are very important as they are foremost institutions for socialization of the young ones. Parents and teachers must expose students to the right types of experiences especially at the formative stage since experiences at formative stage of child development make permanent impression on the child. Inappropriate information about counselling transmitted to them by parents, teachers or peers can lead to negative or wrong perception of guidance and counselling by the students. When parents and teachers are positively or favourably disposed to counselling, students appear to acquire this positive disposition to counselling from their parents and teachers.

In some countries, especially advanced countries where guidance/counselling is well established, students usually have positive or favourable perception of counselling, and they do have enhanced enthusiasm for seeking counselling. This is because parents, guardians and teachers are adequately informed of essence of guidance and counselling and professional counsellors are regarded and treated with respect. The same cannot be said of students in third world countries with either absence of counselling units or poorly established guidance/counselling units which may compel the students to form negative notions about counselling. In a situation where students have negative perception about counselling, they view counselling services with skepticism or they may perhaps think that counselling programmees are irrelevant.

The foregoing helps to explain vividly why students possess different perceptions about counselling. Some students think that counselling is needed for their proper adjustment in the society and for self-actualization. Owing to numerous challenges confronting young people ranging from cultism, bullying, penchant for fraud, examination malpractices, to robbery, counselling is necessary for the youths to overcome these misdemeanours or distance themselves from perpetrators of these vices. However, some students who have negative or unfavourable counselling perceptions think otherwise. They think that counselling is irrelevant and therefore not needed in their lives. They think counselling is for only students with chronic academic, social and disciplinary problems. They also erroneously think it is only worthless people and those without self-esteem that seek for

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counselling. The minds of students need to be disabused so as to make counselling acceptable to them.

All hands must definitely be on deck to sell counselling to the public for counselling to be appreciated and valued. Awareness of counselling must be created. School administrators, government and parents must discharge their social and official responsibilities effectively. They should create the needed awareness of counselling, create conducive environment for counselling to thrive, provide for counselling and encourage students to go for counselling. The counsellors should not make themselves redundant and irrelevant. They must endear themselves to students, teachers and school management through some laudable programmes if they are to remain relevant and appreciated. Relationship among counsellors, students, teachers and school management must be warm for guidance and counselling services to be offered effectively and appreciated. In event of conflict between any of them, wrong perceptions are formed which may influence the acceptance of counselling and effectiveness of counselling services offered.

Harman (2001) found that undergraduates felt positive about counselling services at University of Kentucky Counselling and Testing Centre. Mack (2009) reported negative responses among students when asked about their readiness to seek for intervention from the counselling centre. Laosebikan (2010) also reported a negative and unfavourable attitude towards guidance and counselling by teachers, principals, students and other school personnel in schools.

Some factors have been suggested to have influence on students' perception of counselling. They range from social, psychological to demographic factors. Some of these factors as listed by Vogel, Wester and Larson (2007) are social stigma and fear of self-disclosure. Social stigma refers to negative consequences of one's association with certain condition or disease. Social stigma about counselling is the fear that others will judge a person negatively if he seeks professional counselling help for problems he is experiencing (Vogels, Wester & Larson, 2007). Some students think that seeking for counselling may entail exposing themselves to social stigma. Negative social stigma associated with professional guidance/counselling has been construed as one of the greatest barriers to counselling therapy. Repeated seeking of professional counselling by someone leads other individuals to have negative opinions or perceptions of such persons. A student who frequently seeks for counselling may be probably misconstrued as a problematic person. Social stigma may be the greatest obstacle that hinders people with psychological problems like mental health, HIV, depression, etc from seeking for counselling from professional counsellors. A research by Dean and Todd (1996) showed that social stigma correlated with and predicted people's attitude to guidance/counselling and therefore their eagerness to seek help. People seek less help for issues that are linked to greater unfavourable judgments by others and most of those that received interventions reported social stigma for having sought interventions (Overbeck, 2007). Stefl and Prosperi (2005) found that people that required treatment but failed to go for it were twice more likely than those that needed it and went for it to report social stigma as great treatment barrier.

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 Self-disclosure effect is another important factor that may influence a person's perception of counselling, attitude towards counselling and readiness to seek for counselling. Self-disclosure is the willingness to divulge or share distressing personal information with another person especially a counsellor. Self-disclosure is important in decision making to seek help as seeking for help entails revealing to somebody one's private innermost feelings, thoughts and attitudes. People who seek for counselling should be able to explain in vivid terms, without reservation, the problems for which they seek counselling. This will enable the counsellor design appropriate and effective programmes of actions that guarantee a successful treatment. Fear of self-disclosure can constitute an impediment to seek for counselling. When people feel that secret personal information they pass to the counsellor may be divulged to other people which may make them susceptible to derision, they are most unlikely to seek for help. Onyije (2017) reported a negative relationship between fear of self-disclosure and counselling perception. Cepeda-Benito and Short (2008) reported that self-concealment interacted positively with social support to predict intention for help-seeking and that self-concealers were three times unlikely to seek therapy when experiencing problems. Diala, Muntaner, Walrath Nickerson, LaVeist and Leaf (2000) reported that those that are not comfortable talking about personal issues with professional counsellors were five times more unlikely to seek interventions than those who are comfortable discussing their personal problems with the counsellors.

Statement of the problem
Counselling is very essential as it helps youths realize their potentials, rediscover themselves and at the same time reduces the problems of antisocial behaviours among them. Despite the enormous benefits derivable from counselling programmes, some students apparently have various perceptions of counselling. Some see it as a programme needed to proffer solutions to numerous challenges confronting them. Such students have positive perception about counselling and so are likely to seek for counselling when the need arises. However, there are some students who think that counselling is not important in their lives. Such students think that counselling is for those who have incurable conduct disorder. They think seeking for counselling portrays them in a very bad light and risk being taunted by peers. They have negative perception of counselling and may be reluctant to seek for counselling when the need arises.

The negative perception about counselling may stem from fear of self-disclosure and social stigma associated with counselling. When students feel that it is unnecessary to lay bare their feelings, family, academic, social and personal problems to counsellors because of the fear of negative responses they may receive from family members, peers and friends, they may be reluctant to avail themselves of the counselling services. Furthermore, the fear that a counsellor may peddle the personal information about a counsellee to other people may result to self-concealment. This in turn, may lead to prolongation of the problems that could possibly be solved by counsellors. This may probably explain the reason behind the escalation of social, family, personal and behavioural problems prevalent among the youths in our contemporary society. Therefore the problem of this study is to investigate the influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.

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Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the study is to investigate the influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. In specific terms, the objectives of the study are to

1. determine the influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.
2. find out the influence of social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.
3. determine the joint influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Research questions

The research questions that were answered in this study are as follows

1. What is the influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State?
2. To what extent does social stigma influence counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State?
3. What is the joint influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested in this study. They were tested at 0.05 alpha level.
1. There is no significant influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State
2. Social stigma does not significantly influence counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State
3. There is no significant joint influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State

METHODOLOGY

This is a correlational study involving a sample of 798 SS2 and SS3 students drawn from a population of 2529 SS2 and SS3 students in public secondary schools in Emohua Local Government of Rivers State. The sampling techniques employed are a combination of simple random sampling and proportionate stratified random sampling techniques. The instrument for data collection is Social Stigma, Fear of Self-Disclosure and Students' Counselling Perception Questionnaire. It contains 5 items on social stigma, 5 items on fear of self-disclosure and 10 items on students' counselling perception. All items were non-

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cognitive and of 4-point response options of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly agree. The instrument was vetted by specialists in Counselling Psychology. Its reliability coefficients obtained through Cronbach alpha technique are 0.83, 0.71 and 0.86 for sections on social stigma, fear of self-disclosure and students' counselling perception respectively. Coefficient of simple regression was used to answer research questions 1 and 2, while coefficient of multiple regression was used to answer research question 3. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using t-test associated with simple regression while hypothesis 3 was tested using ANOVA associated with multiple regression. All null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level.

RESULTS

Results obtained from the analyzed data are shown in the tables below.

Rq1: What is the influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State?

Research question 1 was answered using coefficient of simple regression and the results are as presented in table 1.

Table 1: Coefficient of simple regression for the influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among the students

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
(-) 0.675	0.456	0.455

Table 1 shows that the coefficient of simple regression (R) is (-)0.675, the square of coefficient of simple regression (R^2) is 0.456 and the adjusted square of coefficient of simple regression (adj.R^2) is 0.455. The r-value of (-)0.675 implies that fear of self-disclosure has a high negative influence on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. The adjusted r^2-value of 0.455 shows that 45.5% variation in counselling perception is attributable to fear of self-disclosure while the remaining 54.5% variation in counselling perception is not attributable to fear of self-disclosure but to other factors not covered in this study.

HO1: There is no significant influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. Hypothesis 1 was tested using t-value associated with simple regression. The results are presented in table 2.

Table 2: t-value associated with simple regression for the influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among the students

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig
	B	Std error	Beta		
Constant	45.562	0.788		57.817	0.00
Fear of self-disclosure	-1.422	0.055	-0.675	-25.821	0.00

Table 2 shows that t-value for the influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State is -25.821. The t-value is significant at 0.00 alpha level. Since 0.00 alpha level is less than 0.05 alpha level, the t-value is also significant at 0.05 alpha level. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected and alternative hypothesis accepted. This implies that there is a significant influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.

From unstandardized b-coefficients, the model describing the influence of fear of self-disclosure on counselling perception among the students is given by CP = 45.562–1.422FS, where CP represents counselling perception and FS represents fear of self-disclosure.

Rq2: To what extent does social stigma influence counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State?

Research question 2 was answered using coefficient of simple regression and the results are as presented in table 3.

Table 3: Coefficient of simple regression for influence of social stigma on counselling perception among the students

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
(-) 0.536	0.287	0.286

Table 3 shows that coefficient of simple regression (R) is (-)0.536 which shows that social stigma has a moderate negative influence on counselling perception among the students. The square of coefficient of simple regression (R^2) is 0.287. The adjusted square of coefficient of simple regression (Adj.R^2) is 0.286 which shows that 28.6% variation in students' counselling perception is attributable to social stigma while the remaining 71.4% is not attributable to social stigma.

HO2: Social stigma does not significantly influence counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State

Data for hypothesis 2 was analyzed with t-test associated with simple regression and the results are as presented in table 4.

Table 4: t-value associated with simple regression for the influence of social stigma on counselling perception among students

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig
	B	Std error	Beta		
Constant	42.40	0.955		44.376	0.00
Social stigma	-1.190	0.066	-0.536	-17.909	0.00

From table 4, it can be seen that the t-value for the influence of social stigma on counselling perception among the students is -17.909 which is significant at 0.00 alpha level and also significant at 0.05 alpha level. As the t-value is significant at 0.05 alpha level, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted. This shows that social stigma significantly influenced counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. From unstandardized b-coefficient, the model describing the influence of social stigma on counselling perception among the students is given by CP = 42.40–1.190SS, where CP represents counselling perception and SS represents social stigma.

Rq3: What is the joint influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State?

Research question 3 was answered using coefficient of multiple regression and the results are presented in table 5.

Table 5: Coefficient of multiple regression for the joint influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on students' counselling perception

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
(-) 0.680	0.463	0.461

Table 5 shows that the coefficient of multiple regression is (-)0.680 implying that fear of self-disclosure and social stigma had a high negative influence on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. The square of coefficient of multiple regression is 0.463. The adjusted square of coefficient of multiple regression is 0.461 which implies that fear of self-disclosure and social stigma jointly account for 46.1% variation in counselling perception among the students while the remaining 53.9% is not accounted for by the fear of self-disclosure and social stigma.

HO3: There is no significant joint influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State

Hypothesis 3 was tested using ANOVA associated with multiple regression and the results are as presented in table 6.

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Table 6: ANOVA for the joint influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on students' counselling perception

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Regression	9738.154	2	4869.077	342.339	0.00
Residual	11307.245	795	14.223		
Total	21045.398	797			

Table 6 shows that mean square regression is 4869.077 and the mean square residual is 14.223. The degrees of freedom regression, residual and total are 2, 795 and 797 respectively. The calculated f-value is 342.339 which is significant at 0.00 alpha level and also significant at 0.05 alpha level. Since the f-value is significant at 0.05 alpha level, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted. This implies that there is a significant joint influence of fear of self-disclosure and social stigma on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this study, it was found that the fear of self-disclosure has a negative and significant influence on counselling perception among secondary school students in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. The finding that fear of self-disclosure has a negative and significant influence on counselling perception among the students is similar to the findings of Onyije (2017) and Diala, Muntaner, Walrath Nickerson, LaVeist and Leaf (2000). Onyije (2017) reported a negative relationship between fear of self-disclosure and counselling perception among post-primary school students of Abakaliki Municipality. Diala, Muntaner, Walrath Nickerson, LaVeist and Leaf (2000) reported that those that are not comfortable talking about personal issues with professional counsellors were five times unlikely to seek interventions.

The finding that fear of self-disclosure has a negative and significant influence on counselling perception among the students can be explained from the fact that many students find it difficult to divulge some sensitive information they consider personal to them. They regard some information concerning them as secret which they cannot be shared with anybody. They feel uncomfortable revealing such information even to the counsellors who they think may spread the information to other people. Such students may consider counselling as not a sufficient reason to reveal personal secrets to people. They may have wrong and negative perception about counsellors and counselling and are most unlikely to seek for counselling.

It was also found that social stigma has a negative and significant influence on counselling perception among the students. This finding is not surprising and is in line with the findings of Adedara (2016) which reported that social stigma associated with counselling negatively influenced counselling perception of secondary school students in Ogun West. The finding that social stigma has a negative influence on counselling perception among the students

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can be explained from the fact that some students view people who seek for counselling as people who are corrupt, degenerate and hopeless, and therefore should be isolated. Some people see them as unfashionable and lacking in initiatives, hence, they should be avoided. Therefore, people who attach social stigma to counselling perceive counselling in a negative light and may be averse to seeking counselling.

CONCLUSION

Social variables such as fear of self-disclosure and social stigma have been found to have negative and significant influence on counselling perception among students. Thus, increase in fear of self-disclosure during counselling and the more social stigma attached to counselling, the more wrong perception students have about counselling and the more unlikely they will love to access counselling.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended that counsellors should uphold the tenets of their profession about confidentiality in handling matters concerning the clients. When clients are assured that their secret personal matters cannot be revealed to other people, they will be more trusting and open to the counsellors and vice versa. This will enable potential clients to discuss their personal problems with counsellors without reservation.

Secondly, students should cease seeing colleagues who seek for counselling as degenerate and irresponsible. When students cast aspersion to their colleagues who seek for counselling, they are indirectly discouraging others from seeking for counselling. Thus, they should remove any form of social stigma attached to counselling in order to encourage more people to seek for counselling when the need arises.

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