

Efficacy of religious integrated counselling in fostering hospitality and religious harmony in Nigeria: counsellors' perspective

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Abstract

This study surveyed counsellor's opinion on the efficacy of religious integrated counselling in fostering hospitality and religious harmony in Nigeria. The sample for the study was 120, Counselling for Hospitality and Religious Harmony Questionnaire (CHRHQ) was used for data collection Content Validity Index of CHRHQ was 0.85 and 0.87 reliability. Majority agreed that integrated religious counselling could foster hospitality and encourage religious harmony through competent and appropriate use of different skills and techniques. Also, majority had integrated religion into counselling. No sex difference was found on counsellors' perception of ways to foster hospitality and religious harmony through counselling, but sex difference exists in the integration of religion into counselling. It was therefore recommended that learning about different religions should become part of counsellors' training; every mainstream counsellor must take a course in the two major religions – Christianity and Islam, and massive enlightenment programmes through the media are required.

Keywords: Religious-integrated counselling, hospitality, religious harmony, counsellor, christianity, islam.

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Introduction

Religious based therapies are confirmed to be more effective with clients that are highly religious than with those who are not. Clients who involved in religious practices tend to have better health, and fewer mental and physical disorders. Clients were reported to prefer therapists with religious values and those who integrate these values into psychotherapy when dealing with serious problems (Vieten, Pilato, Pargament, & Lukoff, 2013). Numerous studies (Behrens & Terrill, 2011; Dailey, Curry, Harper, Hartwig, Moorhead & Gill 2011; Kennedy, Macnab & Ross, 2015; Koenig, 2012; Paukert, Phillips, Cull, Romero & Stanley 2011; Pearce & Koenig, 2016; Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Shah, Kulhara, Grover, Kumar, Malhotra & Tyagi, 2011) have affirmed the efficacy of religious-integrative counselling for the treatment of several developmental challenges and disorders. Dailey et al. (2011) assert that clients who are involved in religious practices tend to have better health, and fewer mental and physical disorders. Kennedy, Macnab and Ross (2015) recorded positive outcomes of religious inclusive treatment across a range of disorders, including depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, trauma, besides coping with illnesses such as cancer. Paukert et al. (2011) also aver that religious-accommodative cognitive therapy is more effective than secular cognitive therapy for the treatment of anxiety and depression of highly religious Muslim and Christian clients. Likewise, Shah et al. (2011), in their study, found religion to be an important positive factor in employing adaptive coping strategies with residual schizophrenia clients. Spiritual mindfulness techniques, such as acceptance and commitment therapy, were also found to be effective in treating clients with substance abuse as well as clients with internalised stigma and shame (Behrens & Terrill, 2011).

However, despite the efficacy of religion in counselling, religion remains a double-edged sword which serves as an instrument of social harmony and a motivation for violence (Maregere, 2011). The largest

world religions – Christianity and Islam – have caused untold harm and suffering to many people. [Basedau, Vullers, and Korner \(2013\)](#) reported 5,706 deaths from inter-religious violence in Nigeria between 1990 and 2008, and 61,241 between 2006 and 2014. In order not to jeopardise the peace and wellbeing of Nigerians, Muslims and Christians must be hospitable, accommodating and willing to be at peace with one another; hence, the call for religious-integrative counselling as a tool to promote hospitality and foster religious harmony.

The overall goal of counselling is to provide hospitable environment conducive to help clients become fully functioning individuals. The outcome of counselling is determined by the client–counsellor relationship which, is majorly dependent on the counsellor’s attitude and personal qualities. A counsellor, according to Rogers in [Al-Thani \(2012\)](#) must possess three qualities - (1) congruence - genuineness, (2) unconditional positive regard - acceptance and caring, and (3) accurate empathic understanding - an ability to deeply grasp the subjective world of another person. Through counsellors’ hospitable attitude of genuine caring, respect, acceptance, support, and understanding, clients are able to loosen up, change their rigid perceptions and move to a better level of personal functioning. Clients have the opportunity to explore the full range of their experience, which includes their feelings, beliefs, behaviour, and worldview. Counsellors use themselves as the instrument of change by being congruent, accepting, and empathic. Empathy is a self-healing agent, clients feel safer and are less vulnerable, they become more realistic, perceive others with greater accuracy, and become better able to understand and accept others ([Cooper, 2010](#)). When clients are understood and accepted, they become less defensive, more open to their experience, can express their fears, anxiety, guilt, shame, hatred, anger, and other emotions that they had deemed too negative to accept and incorporate them into their self-structure.

The first therapeutic tool for hospitality and harmony is the client-counsellor relationship, counsellor’s competency in establishing warmth, followed by his/her religious competency. Every religious integrative counsellor must be conscientiously familiar with ASERVIC competencies and adhere strictly to them ([ASERVIC, 2009](#)). The first ASERVIC competency, implies that counsellors must be knowledgeable in all religions in order to differentiate appropriately and adequately attend to clients’ religious needs in counselling. A Muslim counsellor is not only going to be versed in the Qur’an and hadiths and their applicability to healing but also in the Bible. Counsellor’s knowledge of client’s religion will encourage better understanding of the client’s worldview and enhance the initiation of empathy and positive regards.

Other therapeutic tools that will encourage hospitality and harmony are faith, prayer, spiritual journaling, forgiveness, religious bibliotherapy, mindfulness, and religious accommodative instruments and therapies ([Al-Thani, 2012](#); [Hathaway, Scott, & Garver, 2004](#); [Hook, Worthington, Davis & Atkins, 2014](#); [Morgen, Morgan, Cashwell & Miller, 2010](#); [Sulaiman, 2019](#); [Worthington & Sotoohi, 2010](#)). [Hathaway, Scott, and Garver \(2004\)](#) submit that using forgiveness in counselling can cause clients to let go of unhealthy anger and move past an abusive situation without justifying the abuse. Religiously guided forgiveness protocols was found to be helpful for clients dealing with emotional problems resulting from harm inflicted by friends or family members. Most researchers agree that the physical health benefits of forgiving come about largely as a result of reducing negative emotions and reducing one’s sense of stress from unforgiveness ([Worthington & Sotoohi, 2010](#)). Anyone who is able to forgive will not hold any grudge let alone hold a religiously based grudge against someone else. Therefore, when counsellors, especially from opposite faiths, are able to teach their clients forgiveness, the larger society will gradually be rid of unforgiving individuals, and anger will be replaced with understanding and tolerance.

In addition, the Spinelli’s Existential-Themed Realms of descriptive inquiry is an ideal therapy that could be explored by counsellors with clients to encourage hospitality and religious harmony, especially if handled with clients from the other religion, such as a Muslim client with a Christian counsellor. The Spinelli’s Existential-Themed Realms ([Morgen et al., 2010](#)) are: (1). The I-focused realm: understanding the worldview of the client here, the counsellor explores the client’s religious beliefs and world experiences. [Cashwell and Young \(2011\)](#) assert that religious beliefs often shape the way clients think, feel and act. A counsellor’s ability to explore the client’s religious experiences is dependent on the counsellor’s competency. Religious competency on the part of the counsellor denotes being knowledgeable in various world religious practices, besides the ability to understand their client’s religion and its applicability to healing, which results in empathy, emanating from belongingness and unconditional self-worth. Empathy is a self-healing agent: if a person can be understood, he/she belongs, feels warmth and safety ([Cooper, 2010](#)). This feeling of warmth, safety and sense of belonging is what translates into hospitality and harmony among religions in the community ([Sulaiman, 2019](#)). (2). The You-focused realm refers to how the client experiences others’ religion(s). Diversity of religious knowledge is what will facilitate hospitality and harmony between religions. Taking classes on different world religions, and attending religious

services of other faiths will be a good way of having better understanding and a road to meaningful contribution. (3). The We-focused/They-focused realm encompasses the total experience between the counsellor and the client in the present and beyond the counselling session. The “who and who” are involved in the counselling session and “how the process is handled” are what facilitate hospitality and religious harmony; for instance, if a Muslim is the one assessing a Christian’s religiosity and treats effectively forgiveness, prayer, God’s image, mediation or life after death emanating from their discussions (Sulaiman, 2019). The counsellor’s competency and style of delivery could motivate the client’s appreciation of the person of the counsellor and his/her religion. This expertise and mode of delivery are what facilitate understanding, leading to hospitality, which is a core factor in the counselling process (Sulaiman, 2019).

As noted earlier, the efficacy of religious integrated counselling has been affirmed by many studies but very few studies have been predicated on its ability to facilitate hospitality and religious harmony, especially in Nigeria. Yet religion remains a source of discord and suffering in Nigeria, particularly among adherents of the two major religions in the country. Sulaiman, (2019) proposed integrative religious counselling as a panacea for hospitality and religious harmony, suggesting that if counsellors could competently attend to diverse religious needs of clients, irrespective of clients’ and counsellors’ religious background, the result will be peace, hospitality and harmony among adherents of both religions – Christianity and Islam. Hence, the need to find out from counsellors their opinion about integrative-religious counselling and its capability to foster hospitality and religious harmony in Nigeria.

This study was guided by the following questions: 1) Are counsellors integrating religion into counselling?; 2) Is religious-integrative counselling perceived by counsellors as a tool for hospitality and religious harmony in Nigeria?; 3) How will counselling encourage hospitality and religious harmony in Nigeria?; 4) Is there sex difference in the integration of religion into counselling and counsellors’ perception of the efficacy of counselling in fostering hospitality and religious harmony in Nigeria?

Method

The study adopted a survey design to explore the opinion of counsellors on the efficacy of religious-integrative counselling to foster hospitality and religious harmony among adherents of the two major religions in Nigeria. The sample selected for this study was drawn out of the delegates of the National Association of Professional Counsellors of Nigeria (APROCON) 2019 Conference – 120: 82 female and 38 male counsellors who volunteered to participate in the study. The delegates were practicing counsellors, actively involved in crises interventions, from all states in the Country. They are either pastoral - mostly trained in theology, and are basically imams/pastors or mainstream counsellors, they assist clients in coping with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Among them were 74 Christians: females 52 and 22 males; while Muslims were 46; 30 females and 16 males. An indication that more Christians than Muslims and more females than males participated in the study.

A self-developed questionnaire named Counselling for Hospitality and Religious Harmony Questionnaire (CHRHQ) was employed for data collection. CHRHQ is a 22-item questionnaire consisting of three sections. Section A consisted of respondents’ personal information, such as sex and religion. Section B comprised questions meant to assist in answering the research questions, with questions such as: Do you think counselling can foster religious harmony? Have you integrated religion into your counselling? Section C required respondents to provide additional information on how religious integrative counselling could foster hospitality and religious harmony. Respondents were to tick or write as appropriate in the space provided. The rating of CHRHQ was 2-points, a space without a tick or a No = 1, and a tick or a Yes = 2. Content Validity Index (CVI) of CHRHQ was 0.85, while its reliability after two weeks correlation between results of 20 counsellors who were not part of the sample for the study yielded 0.87. Scores generated from the questionnaire filled by respondents were analysed using descriptive statistic in form of counts and percentage, cross tabulation and t-test inferential statistic.

Results and Discussion

Results presented in Table I showed participants’ response to the first two research questions on counsellors integrating religion into counselling and their perception on the efficacy of religious-integrative counselling in fostering hospitality and religious harmony. Apparently, majority of the respondents – 65% – had integrated religion into counselling, and an overwhelming majority – 82.5% – believed that religious-integrative counselling could foster hospitality and religious harmony.

Table 1. Response on practice and integrative-religious counselling as a tool for hospitality

Items	Options	Frequency
Have you integrated religion into counselling?	Yes	78(65)
	No	42(35)
Can religious-integrative counselling foster hospitality and religious harmony?	Yes	99(82.5)
	No	21(12.5)

** Numbers in parenthesis are percentage

Results presented in Table 2 revealed counsellors' perception of how counselling could foster hospitality and religious harmony.

Table 2. Responses on ways to foster hospitality and religious harmony

No	Items	Frequency	
		Yes	No
1.	Respecting and appreciating client's religion even when different from mine	115 (95.8)	5(4.2)
2.	Not allowing my religious belief to influence my client's treatment	105(87.5)	15(12.5)
3.	Treating client's religious views even when different from mine	100(83.3)	20(16.7)
4.	Every counsellor must integrate religion into counselling	118(98.3)	2(1.7)
5.	Every counsellor must receive training in major religions of the society	89(74.2)	31(25.8)
6.	I will not avoid issues of differences between my religion and that of my clients	89(74.2)	31(25.8)
7.	Christian counsellor effectively attending to religious beliefs of a Muslim client	86(71.7)	34(28.3)
8.	Adequate understanding of clients religious background, practices and attitudes	115(95.8)	5(4.2)
9.	Assist clients to access their religious strengths even when different from mine	111(92.5)	9(7.5)
10.	Collaboration with other religious denominations to ensure wellbeing of my clients	114(95)	6(5)
11.	Adopting techniques that will assist in treating clients from diverse religion	110(91.7)	10(8.3)
12.	Using different religious books as bibliotherapy for clients	77(64.2)	43(35.8)
13.	If requested, praying with clients during counselling despite religious diversity	81(67.5)	39(32.5)
14.	Enlightenment through the media on religious understanding and tolerance	118(98.3)	2(1.7)
15.	Enlightenment on intervention techniques and psychological themes common to all religions	120(100)	
16.	Competency in counselling skills and techniques for diverse religious counselling	115(95.8)	5(4.2)
17.	Promoting religious harmony through group counselling	112(93.3)	8(6.7)

** Numbers in parenthesis are percentage

All of the respondents – 100% – agreed that massive enlightenment programmes on intervention skills, techniques and psychological themes common to all religions will foster hospitality and religious harmony. Majority of the respondents, 85% - 98% agreed that through counsellor's competency and appropriate use of different religious accommodative counselling techniques religious integrated counselling will foster

hospitality and religious harmony. However, slight variation exist on responses to items 7, 12 and 13. A relatively larger number of the respondents 39/43, were not in support of the options. Indicating that some of the respondents were not willing to pray with or use the religious text of the client if different from theirs. Notwithstanding, results in Table 3 show no significant mean difference.

Table 3. Respondents' views by religion

Items	Religion	No	Mean
Bibliotherapy for clients	Christian	74	1.6351
	Islam	46	1.6522
Praying with clients during counselling	Christian	74	1.6622
	Islam	46	1.6957
Effectively attend to religious beliefs	Christian	74	1.7432
	Islam	46	1.6739

Results presented in Table 4 is an independent t-test of the influence of sex on integration of religion into counselling and counsellors' perception of the efficacy of religious integrative counselling in fostering religious hospitality and harmony. Sex difference existed in the integration of religion into counselling, $t(118) = 4.05$; $p 0.00 < 0.05$, an indication that more males than females have integrated religion into counselling. There was, however, no sex difference in counsellors' perception of the efficacy of counselling, $t(118) = 1.90$; $p 0.06 > 0.05$, indicating that both males and females believe in the efficacy of religious integrative counselling.

Table 4. Influence of sex on the integration and efficacy of religious integrative counselling

Item	Sex	No	Yes	Mean	Mean diff	t	df.	Sig.
Counselling efficacy	Female	18	64	1.7805	.14056	1.898	118	.060
	Male	3	35	1.9211				
Integrative religion	Female	38	44	1.5366	.35815	4.049	118	.000
	Male	4	34	1.8947				

On the space provided for counsellors to comment on other important issues not raised but are pertinent to fostering hospitality and harmony through religious integrative counselling, respondents pointed out that government should employ counsellors at all levels of education to implement religion in counselling and work in harmony with counselling association by mandating the body to develop suitable counselling programmes that will promote national consciousness and national unity at all levels of education. Counselling curriculum should include learning about major languages in addition to learning about major religions, and counsellors should understand the uniqueness of other religions to help spread it without biases and prejudice. Public lectures should be organised regularly by counsellors to orientate and re-orientate the populace on the need and benefits of religious tolerance. This further explains the 100% and 98.3 % responses on items 14 and 15 on the questionnaire.

The high response 82.5% on the efficacy of religious-integrative counselling is not surprising. Counsellors are aware of the efficacy of religion in motivating change in clients' lives (Hathaway, Scott & Garver, 2004; Hook, Worthington, Davis & Atkins, 2014; Morgen, Morgan, Cashwell & Miller, 2010; Sulaiman, 2019; Worthington & Sotoohi, 2010). Expectedly, majority of the respondents were willing to effect change in their community through counselling interventions. Ethically, counsellors are instrument of change, by being congruent, accepting, and empathic, clients feel safer and are less vulnerable, they become more realistic, perceive others with greater accuracy, and become better able to understand and accept others (Cooper, 2010). Therefore, if religious integrative counselling is the tool for the change required, then it is gladly welcomed by majority in line with ASERVIC (2009) competencies. Little wonder why there was no significant sex difference, $t(118) = 1.90$; $p 0.06 > 0.05$ between male and female counsellors in their responses on integrative religious counselling being a panacea for hospitality and religious harmony.

The significant sex difference on respondents' response on if they have integrated religion into counselling $t(118) = 4.05$; $p 0.00 < 0.05$ suggests that male counsellors are conversant with ASERVIC competencies and their implication for professionalism. Females have not probably assimilated the required competencies and are not ready for integration in order not to violate the ethics of the profession.

ASERVIC competency required counsellors to be knowledgeable in different religions. Therefore, irrespective of counsellors' religious views and dispositions, they must be trained in different religions, especially those of their society. Females in this study, therefore, seem not to be competently ready for religious integration but strongly believe in the efficacy of religious integrative counselling as a tool for hospitality and religious harmony in Nigeria.

Furthermore, majority of the respondents agreed that clients must be assisted to access their religious strengths even when different from the religion of the counsellor but a relatively large number when compared to other negative responses were not willing to use the religious text of their clients and pray with them. However, all the respondents – 120 – agreed that massive enlightenment programmes on intervention techniques and psychological themes common to all religions could do the magic. Thus, confirming [Morgen et al. \(2010\)](#), the We-focused/They-focused Spinelli's Existential-Themed Realm, which deals with the total experience between the counsellor and the client in the present and beyond counselling sessions. The experiences derived from counselling impact on behaviour, thereby supporting the assertion of [Sulaiman \(2019\)](#) that the “who and who” are involved in the counselling session and “how the process is handled” are what facilitate religious tolerance, hospitality and harmony; treating religious themes such as forgiveness, prayer, God's image, mediation and life after death emanating from discussions with clients and having adequate knowledge and understanding of the client's religion and its applicability to healing, goes a long way in promoting tolerance, hospitality, peace and harmony among religions. This expertise and mode of delivery are what facilitate tolerance and lead to hospitality and harmony between religious groups.

Respondents' suggested that government should employ counsellors at all levels of education to implement the integration of religion in counselling and work in harmony with Counselling Association of Nigeria by mandating the body to develop suitable counselling programmes that will promote national consciousness and unity at all levels of education. In addition, as recommended elsewhere, [Sulaiman \(2019\)](#) asserts that the first step to facilitate appropriate religious integrative counselling is the adjustment of the counselling curriculum to effectively accommodate religious integrative counselling: (1) a counsellor willing to take up pastoral counselling must receive training in both theology/madrasa and mainstream counselling; a degree in counselling should be a must; (2) every mainstream counsellor must take a course in religions, at least the two major religions – Christianity and Islam.

A counsellor seeking competency in integrative religious counselling will need to: (1) read several good, relevant books on the psychology and sociology of religion and on religious issues in counselling and psychotherapy; (2) read current scholarly literature about religion in mainstream counselling journals and related journals; (3) attend conferences, workshops, seminars and/or classes on religion, counselling and related issues in psychotherapy; (4) commit themselves to reading and understanding the scriptures of other religions – the Bible or Qur'an, as applicable – or take up a class on world religions; and (5) acquire specialised knowledge about religious traditions – such as prayer, worship and mediation – that are frequently encountered in therapy ([Richards & Bergin, 2007](#)).

Massive enlightenment programmes through the media on counsellors and their services are very crucial. Presently, majority of professional counsellors in Nigeria are domiciled in post-primary schools and institutions of higher learning. Therefore, only students in higher institutions of learning and secondary schools are benefiting relatively from counselling services. To foster religious tolerance and hospitality through counselling, there is need to extend these services to the community. The populace need to be informed about the presence of counsellors and the importance of their services to individuals and the community in general.

Also, there is need for collaboration between counsellors – pastoral and mainstream – and the clergy to enhance the role of both counsellors and the clergy. The collaboration will be an avenue for both parties to learn about salient issues and related themes about each other's religion. The collaboration will facilitate exchange of information, working together to help clients, designing specific and suitable therapeutic skills and techniques that are applicable in religious counselling. The collaboration will be an avenue to research into issues on integrative religious counselling and general issues that could facilitate hospitality, promote unity and general wellbeing in the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has achieved its aim of surveying counsellors' perception of the efficacy of religious integrative counselling to promote hospitality and harmony between religions, particularly

between the two major religions in Nigeria. It is glaring that Nigerian counsellors are concerned about the wellbeing of Nigerians, ensuring, in particular, that religious groups are hospitable and willing to live peacefully with each other. This is reflected in the responses of the respondents, majority of who agreed that accommodative religious therapies could enhance hospitality and promote harmony among adherents of different religions. The counsellors surveyed agreed that counsellors must be versed in different religions and language of their community before they could competently educate the populace in self-management skills, which will promote understanding and religious tolerance.

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