

## The Perceptions and Attitudes of Kenyan University Trainee Counsellors Towards Counselling Psychology as a Profession

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### Abstract

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The demand for counselling services in Kenya has increased rapidly because people are experiencing a wide range of conflicts in their everyday lives. This can be attributed to the escalating social, cultural and economic pressures. In response, universities across the country have initiated and implemented counselling psychology programmes with an aim to train professional counsellors who can provide counselling services to the people. This descriptive survey study was designed to reveal the perceptions and attitudes of university trainee counsellors towards counselling psychology as a profession. The study was conducted in two Kenyan universities. A sample of 120 trainee counsellors was purposively chosen for the study and was asked how they perceive counselling psychology as a profession. Most of these trainees were secondary school trained teachers. A questionnaire of 40 items Likert type scale was used to gather data. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The results are presented in form of frequencies and percentages. The results indicate that counsellor trainees have clear positive attitude for their future profession.

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**Keywords:** Perceptions, attitudes, university, trainee, counsellors, counselling psychology, profession

### Introduction

Professional counsellors offer confidential services that focus on the developmental, situational problems of persons of all ages and various multicultural backgrounds (Nugent & Jones, 2005).

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The major role is counselling individuals, groups, or families regarding personal, interpersonal, social, cultural, career concerns and conflicts especially during transitional periods throughout their life spans (Danzinger & Welfel, 2001). In this process an experiential relationship develops between counsellor and client that foster healing and constructive resolution of personal and interpersonal situational conflicts.

According to Ballantine and Spade (2007), professionalization has long been a source of both hope and frustration for practitioners. A profession is an occupation that seeks to regulate itself by (a) developing a consensus concerning what its practitioners must know and be able to perform, and (b) developing an accreditation and licensing system to ensure the transmission of that knowledge and skill. An occupation becomes a profession when organizations such as universities, states and public accept that system (Wise, 2005).

The origin of modern guidance and counselling in Kenya data back to early 1960s. The programme was introduced in the country in 1963 during the first Guidance and Counselling Career Conference held to discuss career choices among students in learning institutions (Oketch & Ngumba, 1999). The programme was later reinforced and emphasized by the 1976 National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies (NCEOP) and various government education commissions. These commissions emphasized on the need to reinforce and empower guidance and counselling in order for it to effectively achieve its objectives. The National Commission on Education objectives and policies of 1976 recognized the vital role of guidance and counselling in enhancing a person's future adaptability with academic learning. The committee recommended that all teachers be trained in guidance and counselling as part of their normal duties.

The Presidential Working Party on Education and Manpower Training for the Next Decade and Beyond of 1988 noted that some schools tended to overemphasize the cognitive aspects of education at the expense of the affective aspect relating to the development of desirable characters and values. The report recommended that guidance and counselling services should be decentralized to district level. The report on student indiscipline and unrests in secondary schools of 2001 made recommendation that the Ministry of Education Science and Technology establishes a strong guidance and counselling programme in the country. It singled out training of teacher counsellors as key to success of such a programme and that training be given a priority and a crash programme both in public and private universities.

In response, universities both public and private initiated and implemented guidance and counselling programmes. In Kenya “guidance” and “counselling” terms seem to be used synonymously even though currently emphasis in the programmes is on the use of the term “counselling psychology”. The government has greatly strengthened the implementation of guidance and counselling services in learning institutions. However, there has been an increase in cases of indiscipline among students in the learning institutions. This casts doubts on the service providers and students themselves. It is on this basis that the study sought to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of trainee counsellors towards counselling psychology as a profession.

## **Literature Review**

Nugent and James (2005) reported that World War II and its immediate aftermath greatly influenced the beginning of professional counselling in United States of America. After the war United States government recognised that millions of returning servicemen needed assistance in coping with the uncertainties of their transition to civilian life. The U.S. government, under the G.I. Bill of Rights and through the Veterans Administration (VA), offered full tuition and reasonable stipends for returning veterans for the period equal to the months they had served in the military. The VA also provided funding for free vocational counselling for all veterans.

Counselling centres were established on major university campuses, and trained counsellors were needed to fill job openings. These developments supported and promoted the need to provide counselling for the normal concerns of persons, the aim that is central to counselling theory and practice today. In response, the VA initiated and sponsored university training programmes for doctoral degrees in counselling psychology. Thus a new profession termed counselling psychology was established (Tolbert, 1982; Whiteley, 1984). Gelso and Fretz (2001), observed that “counselling psychology was a profession waiting to happen”

A report by Woody, Hansen and Rossberg (1989) state that professional associations were very vital to the development of counselling psychology because the newly formed profession was in need of unifying force that could define its role, nurture its growth and implant standards of training.

In response to the shift away from guidance and towards counselling psychology and as a result of the VA's creating and sponsoring programmes for the new field of counselling psychology. In 1953 Division 17 of the American Psychological Association (APA) changed its name from the Division of Counselling and Guidance to the Division of Counselling Psychology (Nugent & Jones, 2005).

During the 1980's as the demand for counselling increased in the community, the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) and the American Mental Health Counsellors Association (AMHCA) merged and with their combined strength promoted the development of Master's Programmes in mental health counselling. They lobbied effectively for state licensure of counsellors. Erick Erikson's theory of life span development, new cognitive and family systems theories, and ethnic and gender issues influenced counselling practice (Nugent & Jones, 2005). New types of services emerged in the community, including family counselling, employee assistance programmes, and substance abuse centres. In the 1990's counselling expanded its services to meet the wide range of needs of people in the community, including career counselling, drug abuse, life skill development and sexual assault and violence among others (Schmidt, 2003). With the idea that counsellors help individuals work through transitions and situational conflicts in a complex, multicultural society it is essential to examine their attitudes towards their future profession. It is important to understand why they prefer the profession. In the literature there are many studies focusing on other professions like teaching (Schutz, Crowder & White, 2001; Sabon, 2003; Krecic & Grmek, 2005) which attempted to reveal the reason why prospective teachers choose teaching as a profession. However, there are still concerns in the literature in terms of counsellor attitude towards counselling psychology as a profession. This study attempts to make some contributions to the field of counselling psychology. Besides, its hoped that the investigation can improve counsellor training process to produce counsellors with positive attitude towards the profession. The study can also motivate further research in different settings.

### **Research Question**

The research question posed for the study was based on the findings of prior empirical research in other professions. The main question was: (i) What are the perceptions and attitudes of prospective counsellors training in public and private universities towards counselling psychology as a profession?

## Research Methodology

A descriptive survey design was used in this study. The investigation was carried out in two universities. Participants were 120 students of 2012 and 2013 class years who were purposively sampled for the study. Data was obtained by use of a questionnaire which was developed to meet the specific objective and answer the research question of the study. The statements used on the questionnaire were based on the findings of prior empirical research in other professions. The questionnaire was a five-point Likert type scale with 40 statements. The participants were asked to choose only one of the five choices listed as: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

## Results and Discussion

The current study investigated prospective counsellors' attitude towards their future profession. The results are presented in tables in form of frequencies and percentages.

**Table 1: Counselling is an Enjoyable and Good Job**

	Frequency	Percentage
SA	40	33.3
A	45	37.5
U	22	18.3
D	11	9.2
SD	2	1.7
TOTAL	120	100

SA: Strongly Agree; A :Agree; U: Undecided; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Table 1, shows most of the trainees agreed with the notion that counselling is both an enjoyable and good job. This clearly demonstrates that the trainees have positive attitudes for this statement of counselling being an enjoyable and good job. The total number of the trainees who indicated to strongly agree and agree with the statement were 85 (70.8%).

**Table 2: Counselling is Lovely and Prestigious Job**

	Frequency	Percentage
SA	48	40.0
A	42	35.0
U	20	16.7
D	8	6.7
SD	2	1.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

SA: Strongly Agree; A :Agree; U: Undecided; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

The results in table 2 indicated that the respondents showed positive attitudes towards counselling. Most of the trainees agreed or strongly agreed with the notion that counselling is a lovely and prestigious job. The total number of trainees who responded to "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" with the statement was 90 (95%). As for the second question the results are not very different from the first question. Other than these positive statements there were some negative statements on the questionnaire as well.

**Table 3: Counselling is the Last Thing I would Like to do**

	Frequency	Percentage
SA	1	1.0
A	2	1.6
U	23	19.1
D	48	40.0
SD	46	38.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

SA: Strongly Agree; A :Agree; U: Undecided; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

The analysis of the negative statement "Counselling is the last thing I would like to do" had low percentage for "Strongly Agree" and "Agree". Only one trainee strongly agreed with the negative statement (1.0%) and only two agreed with the statement a percentage of (1.6%). These responses show that the positive attitude towards counselling is still clear among the participants.

**Table 4: Even Hearing the Mention of Counselling Annoys me**

	Frequency	Percentage
SA	2	1.6
A	3	2.5
U	12	10.0
D	47	39.2
SD	56	46.7
TOTAL	120	100

SA: Strongly Agree; A :Agree; U: Undecided; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

The question posed was “Even hearing the mention of counselling annoys me”. This statement had low percentage for “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” only two trainees strongly agreed with the statement with a total percentage of (1.6%) and only three out of 120 trainees said they agreed with the statement with a total percentage of (2.5%). The total number of trainees who were undecided was 12 with a percentage of (10%). All these data shows the trainees positive attitudes towards counselling.

**Table 5: I can not Think of Myself as a Counsellor**

	Frequency	Percentage
SA	2	1.7
A	3	2.5
U	13	10.8
D	45	37.5
SD	57	49.5
TOTAL	120	100

SA: Strongly Agree; A :Agree; U: Undecided; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Another negative statement was “ I can not think of myself as a counsellor”. This was important for the researchers since the respondents were going to become counsellors and their responses to the statement could show their thoughts and feelings towards counselling perfectly. Among the 120 trainees who participated in the study, only 5 trainees could not think of themselves as counsellors. While 102 trainees stated that they “Strongly disagreed” or “Disagreed” with the statement this indicated that they could think of themselves as prospective counsellors. The number of trainees who were undecided was 13 with a percentage of (10.8%).

**Table 6: Counselling is a Boring and Frustrating Job**

	Frequency	Percentage
SA	1	1.0
A	2	1.6
U	16	13.3
D	38	31.6
SD	63	52.5
TOTAL	120	100

SA: Strongly Agree; A :Agree; U: Undecided; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Some of the statements were neither negative nor positive. A statement like "Counselling is a boring and frustrating job" was related with an assumption and the researchers were interested in learning what the trainees think about that. The results to the statement indicated that in general the respondents did not agree with the statement only one trainee counsellor indicated strongly that counselling is a boring and frustrating job and 2 others agreed with the statement. While 16 were not decided, in total 101 trainees with a total percentage of (84.2%) thought counselling is not a boring and frustrating job.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study was an investigation of the future counsellor's perceptions and attitudes towards counselling. Among the 40 items on the instrument used for the study, researchers were able to analyze only some of them here. Not only for the items discussed but as a whole the study reveals clear positive attitudes towards counselling. When the trainees were asked whether they thought they had made the right decision to enter counselling as a profession and whether they planned to remain in it for the rest of their lives, most of them had a positive attitude towards becoming counsellors. Overall the majority of the participants thought that they had made the right decision to enter counselling profession (78.6%), plan to take it as a lifelong career (80.6%) and display very high level of professional enthusiasm towards their chosen profession (86.8%). The results of this study strongly point positive attitudes towards counselling, however, it also points that the counsellor trainees implicitly held images of counselling as a profession need to be made more explicitly and given voice in the pre-service counsellor training process so as to promote a deeper understanding of the counselling profession.



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