THE PRACTICE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Nkwam C. Uwaoma, PhD, fnpa.
Department of Psychology, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria.
nkwams@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

As the world witnesses great strides in scientific and technological breakthroughs, careers, disciplines and professions move from theory to practice with emphasis on the actual application or use of an idea, belief or method as opposed to theories. Back in the nineteenth century, the recognized professions were law, religion, and medicine simply because such disciplines emphasized practice rather than mere theories. Today, the number of professions is much wider and ever increasing, as occupations become more specialized in nature and more professionalized in terms of requiring certain standards of initial and ongoing education.

A profession is a paid occupation involving a prolonged and specialized education, training or skill, qualification and ethical standards for the interest of others or the public. In general, a profession comprises of skill or expertise in a particular field and entails the application of such a skill or expertise. Psychology as a profession must develop standard and practical procedure or way of doing things. This is the practice of Psychology we are all yearning for. We need to have a convention, tradition, and method of doing things, and indeed, an abiding policy particularly in the developing nations. The practice of psychology must be expressed in action, skill and problem solving rather than thought, theory or ideas. This calls for the application of a scientific research to help people, organizations and communities function better (APA, 2011). Indeed, psychological practice aims at identifying and helping to address psychological problems in any given society.

A profession is a vocation built upon specialized educational training, the purpose of which is to supply objective counsel and service to others for a direct and definite compensation, wholly apart from expectation of other business gains.

Technically speaking, a profession involves a defined, disciplined and distinct group of persons who measurably adhere to known/identifiable ethical standards, hold themselves together via qualifications and ethics and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized body of knowledge or learning, through research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise their skills in the interest of others. Psychologists, no doubt, have all these attributes but the application of the theoretical knowledge and development of appropriate skills still remain questionable among some of them. This of course, directs the main thoughts of this discourse.

In the view of Rutlege (2018), for any profession to be in real practice, it must have the following:

1. **Great Responsibility**: Professionals handle matters/issues of great importance to their clients and as such carelessness, and inadequate or lack of skills or breach of ethics become disasters.
2. **Accountability:** Professionals hold themselves totally accountable for the quality of their work with their clients.
3. **Based on specialized or theoretical knowledge:** Professionals offer specialized services based on theory, knowledge, and skills that are most often peculiar to their profession and beyond the comprehension of those outside their profession/field.
4. **Institutional preparation:** Professionals require noticeable and often long periods of training, preparation/ education.
5. **Autonomy: P**rofessionals have control for their works; they define terms, processes and conditions of work to be performed by clients.
6. **Clients rather than customers:** Professionals choose clients rather than accepting everybody.
7. **Direct working relationships:** Professionals work directly with their clients rather than through intermediaries/proxies.
8. **Ethical constraints:** Professionals are bound to a code of conduct or ethics peculiar to their profession.
9. **Merit-based:** Professionals realize or achieve employment or success based on merit and attracts clients and profit based on competence/merit.
10. **Capitalist Morality:** Professionals cannot maintain ethical practice without morality in terms of respecting the individual rights of the clients and their own lives.

According to Uwaoma (2015), a profession has various features some of which include, practical objectives, techniques involving intellectual operations, organized body of members with approved qualifications and specific rules and aims that are altruistic or helpful to the service of mankind and techniques that are educationally communicable.

Based on the above, there is need to revisit how our present curriculum and institutions prepare or train our undergraduate and graduate students. Do we actually produce graduate psychologists who can stand on their professional feet to set up clinics, consultancies or firms to practice? Do we really equip them with necessary skills for practice as professionals? Most of our present day psychologists seem to have theoretical knowledge, a prerequisite for professionalism, but lack the practical skills, a balancer to achieve success in this profession.

Frankly speaking, our present curriculum does not contain much about psychotherapy and technical skills for successful practice in various fields psychology. Thus, there is an urgent need for our professional bodies, teachers/ lecturers, policy makers and curriculum developers in our unique profession to emphasize real development and growth in practicum and proper skills acquisitions. One major question: Do we still realize when last our curriculum was revised or reviewed in Nigeria? Psychologists as

professionals should via Nigerian Psychological Association (NPA) come up with a national review of our curriculum and then make such available to NUC.

RECOGNITION AND CERTIFICATIONS IN NPA

The recognition of various branches of psychology and their associations by NPA is seen as the magic that is spreading the news of psychology and its relevance like a hurricane fire. Today we have the social, clinical, industrial/ organizational, forensic, counselling, developmental psychology associations etc fully recognized by NPA. Membership to these recognized units increases internal cohesion among members and their activities invariably increase the Nigeria public's consciousness of psychology. When the time fully ripens for certification, these recognized associations will no doubt play major roles. In my humble submission, all the modalities for the certification of Nigerian psychologists based on specialties should be set in motion. I am optimistic that very soon psychology in Nigeria will get a charter statue. Then the practice of psychology will become a professional career and no longer an all comers' affair.

ESTABLISHMENT/ OPERATION OF STATE CHAPTERS OF NPA

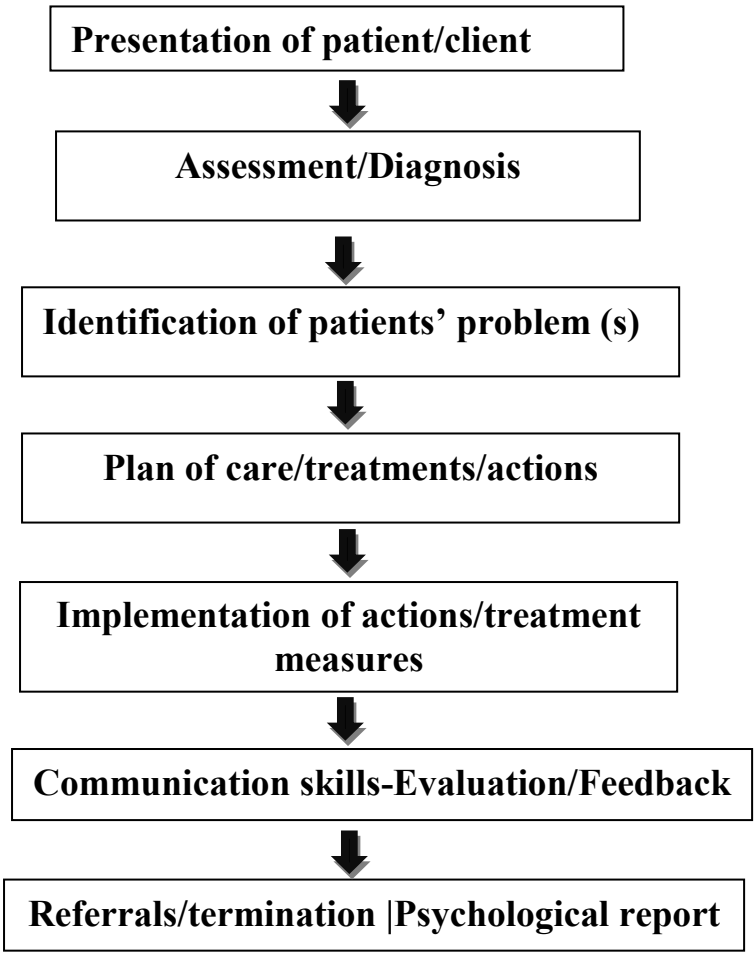
In the very unique wisdom of the leadership of NPA, state chapters were established in various states in Nigeria. This among other things is aimed at developing a register for all categories of psychologists resident in various states and making the voice of psychologists heard in all the states of the federation. With the effectiveness of these state chapters, it becomes easier to network with all psychologists in Nigeria. It is then expected that the leaders of these state chapters would show good examples by galvanizing all members into a strong team. So far results from those already inaugurated state chapters are alarming. Today global, national, state and community issues are receiving psychological interpretations and interventions. Indeed, it is a huge development for NPA as faster means of communication and response to national issues of interest.

A CALL FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS

We seem to be living and operating in our different worlds, departments, universities, and psychological fields without a clear cut and easy to understand psychological process; the simple and reliable method to carry out professional activities. Due to my background in clinical psychology, let me attempt a clinical psychological process which can be adapted to any branch of psychology in practice.

A well-defined psychological process provides standardization in practice, adherence to standards, diagnosis that is peculiar to psychologists or psychotherapists, use of standard language, and classifications of data universally recognized. When we get this psychological process right as it should, our uniqueness as professionals in practice will be identifiable. Though we are still struggling with some myopic psychiatrists and medical practitioners in the hospitals, unbalanced personnel/industrial personnel managers in firms and organizations and forensic police experts and lawyers in the

courts, to mention but a few, a clearly defined psychological process is a distinguishing answer in this struggle.



(Clinical Psychological Process: Uwaoma, 2021)

At present, there are challenges in the proper installation, acceptance and practice based on psychological process. There are poor skills, poor practical knowledge, poor documentations, paucity of frame/patterns of generating psychological data, poor diagnosis/assessment tools, poor data bank and poor identification of relating/sustaining/opportunistic factors for psychological problems, and insufficient knowledge relating to possible past experiences/history. Others are the challenge of actualizing objectives/goals, poor knowledge of psychotherapy to be used, poor methods of stating/relating results to the public and fellow psychologists/colleagues, paucity of qualified psychotherapists, lack of administrative and government's support and fear and negative attitudes of some psychologists in various areas to venture into practice. We really need to establish journals, links, psychological websites, and social networks/groups where psychological treatments/interventions and results in clinics, hospitals, industries and consultancies should be documented for public/professional consumption.

CLIENTAL BILLING IN PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Every profession, with special reference to Nigeria/Africa, has a form/pattern of cliental charge or billing which ushers in standardization. Often this charge is in consideration of the expertise, experience and qualification of the practitioner, nature of the service to be provided, tools/tests to be used, duration of the service, etc.

Billing for mental health services is presently a great challenge in Nigeria due in part to the variability in the requirements across private and public issuers. The challenge becomes clearer and deeper when varying aspects of psychological practice such as screening and history taking, coordination and case management, consultation with other service providers, use of e-psychotherapy or telemedicine for service provision and outreach and education are put into consideration.

The major aims of this paper are to put to proper perspective the true picture of the absence of agreeable clinical billing among Nigerian psychotherapists, attempt to offer a seemingly billing pattern based on billing considerations and agitate the minds of those in practice to see the need of coming together to put things in order especially as it concerns a billing schedule.

CLINICAL BILLING/CHARGING

This is the amount of money those who receive psychological services are meant or expected to pay to those who render the service to them (Dike & Ihebom, 2015; Uwaoma, 2017). This is often a major part of the clinical treatment contract signed by the psychotherapist and patient or his care giver wherein the mode of payments, period of payments and details and amounts of charges are contained (Uwaoma, 2015; Martin & Pear,2007). Psychological service-charge or bill includes gross, net, unit and marginal costs (Bragg, 2013) involved in rendering the service in question. Such a bill takes care of clinical services, staffing, equipment, psychological tests, administrative and infrastructural costs.

The payment obtained from services rendered is an important parameter to ensure the therapists' physical and psychological wellbeing. As explained Gutheil and Gabbard (1993), "Money is a boundary in the sense of defining the business nature of the therapeutic relationship. This is not love; it's work". It is therefore no gainsaying that billing or charging fees for psychotherapeutic services is an important determinant of the nature of the therapeutic process and the boundary of the patient-therapist relationship (Zur, 2016). In Nigeria, charging or billing clients for psychotherapeutic services has been a fundamental challenge that may be viewed from three broad perspectives; the clients, the individual psychologist and the acceptability of a common billing schedule among Psychotherapists.

A typical Nigerian client, upon approaching the psychologist or psychotherapist, builds an inordinate perception that the psychologist should and would offer services for free. Clients may sometimes equate the psychotherapist to a religious preacher/counsellor who should keep to his "call" and not focus on making a living from it. After all, religious sermons and services are given free, why should a one on one "advice" by a psychotherapist for instance, worth so much money?

Apart from this inordinate perception by clients, there is also the knowledge that most clients seeking psychotherapy for instance, are from poor families. Nigeria is known to have the very high poverty rate. Majority of Nigerians live on less than a Dollar daily. Therefore, when the poor client approaches a psychologist and is given a bill or charge, all the client or his family does is to plead for substantial discounts or in some cases, offer to pay at a later date which may not come. In some other cases, the client or family would demand for free therapy by emotionally appealing to the psychologist. Words like "if you help us, God will bless you" become strong examples for emotional appeals.

On the part of the psychologists, some fail to have a clear belief in psychotherapy as a profession. Even with well-grounded knowledge of the theories, techniques and advantages of psychotherapy, some Nigerian clinical psychologists and other psychologists are very reluctant to set up therapeutic clinics where mental care can be provided to those in need just as obtained among Medical Doctors, Pharmacists, Laboratory Scientists, Lawyers etc. Most end up as teachers offering theoretical services to students in different educational institutions. Some take up employment in multinational organisations, the military and paramilitary centres while others become consultants to companies. Less attention is given to providing practical psychological services to the society. Only a very minute few set up private psychology clinics or make themselves available by offering therapeutic services to clients at a charge. With such a mind-set, how then can the psychotherapists think of billing? There must be a service before considering a charge for the service provided.

Also, several Nigerian clinical psychologists and psychotherapists apart from being employed in different organisations, earn relatively satisfactory pay. The zeal to pursue a part-time work for additional pay as a psychotherapist is no longer there. In our opinion, such psychologists may see psychotherapy as a way of giving back to the society, improving their practical knowledge or a process of learning new skills and teaching.

A significant challenge to billing/charging clients among Nigerian Clinical Psychologists and other psychotherapists is the non-availability of a joint platform where the different professionals offering psychological interventions meet. Due to the non-existence of this platform, developing a unified and commonly acceptable billing/charging schedule becomes almost impossible. Every psychotherapist is left to charge subjectively. With a unified body of professionals offering psychological care and service, it would be possible to develop a billing/charge schedule for different psychological interventions and sessions.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CLINICAL BILLING

Till date, psychological services are grouped under the humanitarian service wherein financial gain is never the bedrock of interaction but service for the protection, preservation, survival, and redemption of human beings irrespective of costs and class of people involved. Again, being a relationship based on mutual trust and understanding (Uwaoma & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2015), the social and economic status of the clients ought to be considered so that the rapport and harmony required for psychotherapy could be achieved. Indeed, below are some areas of considerations in cliental billing.

i. **Nature of psychopathology:** The amount to be billed should be in consideration of the nature of patent's ailment. What is its magnitude or severity? What is the type? How long has it been with the client, community or organization? Are there some opportunistic events, issues or diseases? What would be needed to handle the target behaviour? How long would it take to be managed? A good answer to these questions will give a working picture or an estimate of the cliental billing.

ii. **Standard and location of the service centre:** Psychological service centre is an essential element in psychological billing. The standard, content, equipment and quality of service of a centre determine the cost of service it renders. What is the location of the service centre? Rural and urban office locations differ in costs, acceptance and assessments.

iii. **Staffing:** Who renders service at the psychological services' centre matters. What is his professional qualification? How many professionals and non-professionals or administrative and technical staff are involved? The quality of staff influences their services and of course, the charge or bills to be paid by those who receive the service.

iv. **Treatment duration and psychological tests needed:** Different psychological diseases and cases require varying treatments and interventions. Even when two or more patients present the same ailment, their dimensions differ and as such treatment schedules vary. Not all psychological ailments will require the employment of psychological tests in assessment, and evaluation of clinical interventions. The age and exposure of the patients matter a lot. Will the patient require an aid while responding to the psychological test? Will an interpreter be involved? How many psychological tests will be used and will they be simple paper and pencil ones or will they be complex psychological tests?

v. **Involvement of other health professionals:** Psychological service is a team work involving experts from various fields. Sometimes it is not only psychologists from various specialties that are involved, other health professionals (such as psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, social workers, physicians and physiotherapists), lawyers, nutritionists, financial experts and technicians are involved. Their service charges need to be built into the overall psychological service bills.

vi. **Referrals and contacts:** How did the client come to the Psychology Services' Centre? Did he come through referrals, personal contracts, from friends, work places etc.? Such links ought to be considered while billing the patient. If the patient was referred from a psychiatric hospital, we should be careful and considerate while billing knowing that he has some other bills to take care of. Again, if our service centre is in partnership with other related organizations we are under obligation to pay them their commission

vii. **Relationship with clients:** We are Africans among who relationships count. In as much as bills must be paid so as to fund the service centre, relationships must be considered. Relatives of staff and members of the community where the service centre is located are friends of the centre and as such little charging reductions are needed if not for anything as part of our corporate social responsibility.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Facts must be stated and faced. Realities must be considered. There must be fairness while billing. We must be honest and realistic in our billing. In practice, we are under obligation to always do what is right and as such bill with the best possible intention as a mark of respect for our profession, humanity, caregivers and clients. We do not have to come up with bills that will pose another problem for the patients and the care-givers. Location differences must be indicated and respected. The fact that the service charge for a session may be 100 to 200 dollars in USA will never mean that Nigerian psychotherapists should charge their patients the naira equivalent of the USA session's bill. Bill what is fair and affordable.

CHALLENGES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

1. Paucity and or lack of emphasis on skills in our training centers.
2. Need for curriculum improvement and review
3. Emphasis on theory rather than practice (theories must still guide practice)
4. Low level of publicity
5. Poor mentoring
6. Poor encouragement by government and its agencies. (Nursing profession received an improved national outlook when the wife of one-time president of Nigeria was a nurse. Thanks to her.
7. Absence of uniformity in cliental and consultancy charges
8. Poor documentation of psychological interventions and results
9. Low involvement of psychologists in national issues and leadership
10. Inadequate training and paucity of practical skills acquisition and training schools
11. Paucity of indigenous psychological tools, scales and tests
12. Inadequate psychologists. This calls for the establishment of more departments of psychology in our private and public universities

THE WAY FORWARD

1. **Establishment of psychological skills' acquisition centres:** This is an urgent task that will require the joint efforts of NPA, Fellows and indeed all psychologists. Such centres must be practice oriented where practical skills will be taught. It is our humble suggestion that all undergraduate and graduate students should compulsorily go for at least 3-6 months' training before graduation
2. **Psychological service centres**: It has more than ever become necessary for all departments of psychology in our universities to establish and run viable and functional psychological services' centres where psychological services would be made available to members of the university community and its environs. The obvious and usual practice of establishing make-shift ones during accreditation exercises should stop. This will help to advertise us and then make us more relevant to our society.
3. **Uniformity in Billing/Charging:** As already presented in this paper, we need to be firm and fair in establishing a workable billing pattern in consideration of the variables already mentioned.
4. **Establishment of psychological process, and modules/ directory for handling various psychopathologies:** The psychology process must be strongly established

and emphasized in all branches and blocs of psychology. There are peculiar psychological problems in Nigeria which are different from what are obtainable in other nations and as such we must be ready to establish our own indigenous codes or models to handle them.

5. **Let us write more:** Some of us are no longer writing. Let us write from our Nigerian backgrounds. Let us write on national issues from our psychological perspectives. Every day we face key and boiling current national issues. NPA, Fellows, State chapters and various branches of psychology as already existing should do more. At present, NPA has done well by establishing many state chapters and encouraging the professionalism and formation of the association of various branches of psychology. The next step is to ensure that all is well with these Professional units. If we do not do anything we would be swallowed up. Indeed, if we see something we should professionally say and do something meaningful.
6. **Creative of Referral Centres:** There is an urgent need to establish referral centres in major cities in Nigeria where psychologists could refer clients for psychological services. Such centres ought to have modern psychological facilities to offer adequate psychological services. It is expected that NPA should be on the lead to establish such centres. Just like we have national hospitals and national agriculture and horticultural research centre, we must strive to have national psychological and referral centres which must serve as hub for research, training and treatment.
7. **Creation and strengthening of state chapters of NPA: C**ongratulations to the expert leading hands of NPA in establishing state chapters of NPA which have moved NPA to speed lanes of recognition, function and greater awareness. So far so good. However, efforts should be made to establish branches in all states and weak state branches should be encouraged and strengthened.
8. **Certification:** It is now more than ever needed to develop modalities for the certification of psychologists in Nigeria while hopefully waiting for the signing into law of the Psychology act.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

There are great opportunities in psychological practice outside the classroom. One works at the liberty of his own time and schedules and in the happiness of practicing what years were spent learning. The private practitioner chooses the very type of population to work with or work for based on specialization. There is no boss except the practitioner. What a freedom|. It is easy to make and plan for a steady income which can easily be grown via building up clients' list. Setting up a practice in a hospital, mental facility, established firm or consultancies is another viable option where there is an existing line of staff and facilities that can be made use of. My own clinic is at present, in an already established and registered hospital mainly because I am still lecturing in a government owned university. I make use of hospital staff and facilities and pay a token to the hospital management.

Our rural communities are yearning for psychological service. Every aspect of human endeavour and organization has a need for psychological service. Discover them and walk in.

The desire of most graduates of psychology is to be on their own especially in the face of the contemporarily economic time. Though this is not all that easy in Nigeria for now, it is still something worth trying. There are a few guidelines for actualizing this;

(i) **Gain experience first:** Experience is very important in psychological practice. Hence mentorship and hard-work are vital in gaining the business skills.

(ii) **Create strong plan before taking off:** Be trained and acquire needed skills. Look for those already in the business. Look for experts in business management, law, property acquisition and management, mental health etc.

(iii) **Discover where clients exist and how to reach them.** Do something unique in that area to stand out among other practitioners

(iv) **Move with the market trend:** To be successful in psychological practice, there is need to discover where the market exists and move towards that direction.

(v) **Indicate your worth:** Let your service charge indicate your worth and your area's market, bearing in mind that the service charge includes; Phone systems, computing, psychological test materials, accommodation, assistants and equipment costs.

(vi) **Market yourself:** Start with giving free talks inchosen and known areas. Be just known by that. Meet people and organizations which may likely refer clients to you e.g. Faith-based organizations, educators, allied health professionals etc. This on its own is building a strong website for psychological practice. Indeed, psychological competence will sell a person but at the beginning website does.

(vii) **Diversification:** Our psychological skills can be used in a variety of ways. We can write books/ novels, we can get into sport psychology, community counseling, advertisement, public relations, just name it.

CONCLUSION

Psychological practice in Nigeria is at present in its infant state. With its quick strides towards full professionalism, there is need to move from theory to practice and of course from the class room which can only accommodate a few of us to the wider society where our practical services are needed. Though there are many challenges ahead of us, with the unifying NPA, state chapters and committed psychologists of varying backgrounds, we must succeed.

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