



PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY COUNSELLORS IN SRI LANKA: AN ANALYSIS OF BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Counselling is one of the most important professions in the world when discussing mental health. The main objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by Sri Lankan Professional counsellors in their professional setting. The current situation of establishing Counselling in Sri Lankan context and the practical challenges of counselling were studied. For the study, 20 Professional counsellors and 5 paraprofessionals were selected using purposive sampling. This descriptive study collected qualitative data through primary and secondary data. Interviews and participant observation were used as techniques. The collected were analyzed through content analysis. It was revealed that counsellors hold ambiguous legally authorized power in contemporary Sri Lanka. Counsellors do not have an opportunity to take an accepted license to practice the profession. Many of them refer to international licenses and its code of ethics such as American Counselling Association and British Counselling Association. Less public awareness/ acceptance and hope of mental health services from counselors are other professional challenges. Counselors who deal with confidential information have faced an immeasurable challenge regarding confidentiality due to the request for client information on the Freedom of Information Act. A similar effect has been encountered through exploratory, investigative journalism programs involving unannounced live recorded phone calls. Some paraprofessionals at the top of the hierarchy have had to face professional pressure from professionals if there is any popularity in the counseling center and counselor in dealing with paraprofessionals. Looking at counselors in the government sector, because the administration evaluates only on reports, many things that are done in practice are not properly evaluated. They think that counselors should be given a suitable atmosphere to reduce work stress and work freely.

Keywords: Challengers, Counselling, Government Sector, Para Professionals, Professional Counsellors

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1. Introduction

Counselling and psychotherapy represent a professional discipline that encompasses a broad spectrum of therapeutic approaches aimed at promoting mental health, emotional well-being, and personal growth. There is no nationally recognized valid licence-issuing system in Sri Lanka. Therefore Most Sri Lankan counsellors' are still work without a licence. but they have very qualified, counselling skills with a background in psychology. Professional counselling is a collaborative relationship that empowers individuals, families, and groups to address and overcome challenges, achieve their goals, and enhance their quality of life. Counsellors assist clients in identifying their potential, exploring options, and developing strategies to manage emotional turmoil, improve communication, strengthen self-esteem, and foster behavioral changes conducive to optimal mental health. Counselling is not merely about providing advice or directing clients toward specific actions; rather, it is a process of enabling individuals to make informed choices, reduce confusion, and explore their feelings openly in a supportive and non-judgmental environment.

The therapeutic relationship offers a safe space for clients to address bottled-up emotions such as anger, anxiety, grief, and embarrassment, leading to greater understanding and emotional resolution. As McLeod (2009) highlights, counselling provides an opportunity for individuals to explore their inner conflicts and find clarity. Similarly, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2020) emphasizes that counselling facilitates self-knowledge, emotional acceptance, and personal growth, helping individuals live more resourcefully and satisfyingly.

In professional practice, counsellors operate at various levels. At the micro level, they work with individuals, families, and groups to address psycho-social challenges. Occasionally, they engage at the macro level, contributing to planning and policy development to enhance the well-being of communities. This dual engagement highlights the critical importance of equipping counsellors with the requisite knowledge, skills, attitudes, and mindsets to effectively navigate diverse professional contexts. Furthermore, professional rights and protections are indispensable components of supporting and sustaining effective counselling practice.

Therefore, this study focuses on the challenges faced by professional counselors in Sri Lanka. By examining these barriers and their implications, the research seeks to contribute to the advancement of counselling as a profession, offering insights to strengthen its framework and enhance support systems for practitioners.

2. Review of Literature

When considering the previous studies related to professional challenges faced by counselors in Sri Lanka, 2020 Wijesinghe & Perera found that in Sri Lanka, the profession faces unique challenges shaped by socio-cultural, legal, and administrative contexts. In 2018, Fernando revealed that counselors have social stigma and misconceptions about mental health often hinder the effective delivery of counseling services, reflecting broader societal attitudes that need to change for the profession to thrive.

It is reported that the World Health Organization Despite increasing recognition of mental health issues, such as the rise in depression and anxiety disorders globally, The counseling profession in Sri Lanka is still in its early stages of development. [WHO, 2022). Challenges like a lack of formal licensing systems, limited awareness among the public, and inadequate institutional support have prevented the profession from achieving its full potential (De Silva, 2019). Counselors often find themselves working in environments that lack resources and appropriate evaluation mechanisms, further limiting their ability to make meaningful contributions to mental health care (Samarasinghe 2021).

However, this paper aims to describe the challenges encountered by individuals holding counseling designations in Sri Lanka, analyze their implications for the profession, and offer insights into its future development. Not examining the client inside. By systematically examining these barriers and opportunities faced by Sri Lankan practitioners, the study seeks to contribute to the expanding body of knowledge that underscores the need for enhanced support systems to strengthen counseling practices.

3. Barriers and Opportunities Faced by Counsellors in Sri Lanka

According to the secondary data, Counselors in Sri Lanka encounter a range of barriers and opportunities that impact their professional practice. Udayakumari (2022) one significant challenge lies in educational and training limitations, where gaps in the curriculum and teaching methodologies hinder the practical exposure necessary for effective counseling. Studies indicate that many resource persons lack hands-on experience, resulting in a disconnect between theoretical instruction and application. Additionally, outdated syllabi and inadequate course revisions impede students' understanding of psychological disorders and treatment techniques.

Another critical area is practice supervision, which has been identified as a major gap in the profession. In response, The Asia Foundation piloted a peer-led, group-based supervision model for government counseling cadres. While this approach improved support systems, logistical constraints, such as the limited availability of supervisors and inconsistent policies, have reduced its overall effectiveness.

Cultural and social barriers also pose challenges, particularly in rural areas where traditional family-based support systems often overshadow the perceived value of professional counseling. The stigma surrounding mental health further discourages individuals from seeking professional help, limiting the reach of counseling services.

Moreover, institutional and resource limitations significantly affect the profession. A shortage of qualified counselors, especially in rural regions, remains a persistent issue. Financial difficulties prevent some students from completing their education in counseling, reducing the availability of trained professionals. Language barriers, including the predominance of English in reference materials, further disadvantage non-English-speaking students. Professional development opportunities for counselors are limited as well. While integrating structured practice supervision could enhance professional growth, challenges such as inadequate collaboration between field and faculty supervisors and the absence of mentorship programs or clear career pathways hinder these efforts.

Although much of the research focuses on the challenges counselors face when working with clients, this study emphasizes the barriers they encounter in their professional practice. A particular focus is placed on the critical issue of counselor safety, which remains an essential theme in advancing the field of counseling in Sri Lanka.

4. Methodology

This investigation made use of a qualitative design that is exploratory in nature and as its goal sought to seek the experiences and opinions of counselors studying and practicing within a certain environment. It incorporated a purposive sampling procedure where 20 professional counselors and five paraprofessionals with the appropriate skills and experience were sampled. This sampling procedure enabled purposive sampling to be applied to participants who had the ability to provide valuable insights on the topic of study.

Data collection methods that are quantitative in nature complemented in-depth understanding were semi-structured interviews and participant observation in-phone methods emphasizing the problem-solving process of counseling and its complexities. The interviews, on the other hand, were intended to obtain accounts of personal experiences and points of view and observations of the participants while participant observations enriched qualitative data received from interviews. Secondary data were gathered from accessible materials, other than interviews- due to the existence of research and literature references, institutional reports for the purpose of providing research context on the teaching of counseling.

The thematic, pattern and core issues present within the qualitative data were identified through the use of content analysis method. It was possible for the researcher to assess the data in a manner that allowed understanding the drawbacks in the counselor training and education in Sri Lanka and also giving room for improvement.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Ambiguous Legal Authority and Lack of Licensing

In Sri Lanka, counsellors face significant legal challenges due to the absence of a formalized licensing system. For example, a professional counsellor practicing in Colombo shared that they had to rely on certifications from international bodies such as the American Counseling Association (ACA) to demonstrate their qualifications. Without a local licensing framework, clients often question the credibility of practitioners, leading to a lack of trust in their services. Furthermore, this gap in regulation allows unqualified individuals to pose as counsellors, undermining the profession's reputation and effectiveness.

5.2. Public Awareness and Acceptance

Mental health stigma is deeply ingrained in Sri Lankan society, where seeking counselling is often viewed as a sign of weakness. For instance, one counsellor reported that many clients refuse to disclose their attendance at counselling sessions to their families due to fear of being labeled as “mentally ill.” This lack of understanding reduces the willingness of individuals to seek professional help. Additionally, societal misconceptions—such as viewing counselling as unnecessary or a Western concept—further hinder its acceptance. An awareness campaign led by a mental health organization in Kandy aimed to educate the public but faced resistance, illustrating the uphill battle counsellors face in changing perceptions.

5.3. Challenges of Confidentiality

Maintaining client confidentiality is one of the cornerstones of counselling, yet Sri Lankan counsellors face unique challenges in this regard. For example, a practitioner recounted an incident where a media outlet attempted to expose a client's personal details as part of an investigative journalism piece. Additionally, the Freedom of Information Act has led to situations where counsellors are pressured to disclose client information, particularly in cases involving legal proceedings. These incidents create an ethical dilemma for counsellors, forcing them to navigate between legal compliance and professional ethics.

5.4. Professional Pressures in the Hierarchical System

In settings where paraprofessionals work alongside qualified counsellors, tensions often arise due to hierarchical dynamics. A paraprofessional in a government-run counselling center shared their experience of being undermined by senior counsellors when their work received public recognition. Instead of fostering collaboration, these competitive pressures can create a toxic work environment, discouraging both parties from effectively contributing to the field. This issue is compounded when paraprofessionals, who often lack formal training, are expected to perform tasks beyond their expertise, leading to further friction.

5.5. Administrative Evaluations in the Government Sector

Counsellors employed in government institutions face the challenge of being evaluated based solely on administrative reports, which often fail to reflect the complexities of their work. For example, a government counsellor in Galle mentioned that their performance was assessed based on the number of cases reported, rather than the outcomes or quality of counselling provided. This system overlooks the emotional labor and individualized support counsellors offer, discouraging innovation and professional growth.

5.6. Workplace Stress and Atmosphere

Counsellors often operate in high-stress environments with limited resources. A professional working in a rural area described how their office lacked privacy, with counselling sessions being held in a room adjacent to a busy administrative section. This lack of a conducive environment not only affects the counsellor's ability to work effectively but also impacts the client's willingness to open up. Additionally, the absence of support mechanisms, such as regular supervision or peer consultations, exacerbates the stress counsellors face in their roles.

6. Recommendations

- Establishing a local licensing body: Creating a national counselling council could standardize qualifications and ethics, similar to frameworks in countries like India.
- Awareness campaigns: Partnering with schools, workplaces, and religious institutions to normalize mental health discussions, such as organizing workshops or seminars led by counsellors.
- Confidentiality safeguards: Enacting laws that explicitly protect client information in counselling sessions, with penalties for breaches.
- Supportive work environments: Providing soundproof rooms for counselling sessions and offering regular supervision sessions for counsellors to address workplace stress.

7. Conclusion

The profession of counselling in Sri Lanka is fraught with challenges, from legal ambiguities to societal misconceptions and workplace stress. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach involving legal reform, public education, and institutional support. By tackling these barriers, the counselling profession can be better equipped to serve as a cornerstone of mental health care in Sri Lanka.

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