

Exploring The Acquisition And Application Of Counseling Skills By Speech Therapists In Communication Disorder Interventions: Perspectives Of Speech Therapists, Clients And Caregivers

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to assess the acquisition and use of counseling skills by speech therapists in interventions among people with communication disorders in Nairobi City County-Kenya. The study was guided by the Person-Centered Theory by Carl Rogers, and Person-Centered Care theoretical framework by Brendan McCormack and Tanya McCance. The study used the descriptive survey research design. The research methodology employed was the mixed research approach. The target population included SLPs, people with communication disorders and their caregivers. The research purposively sampled 10 SLPs - 5 treating pediatrics and 5 for adult patients. 20 caregivers for adults and 20 caregivers for pediatric patients. 4 adult patients for each SLP. Thus, a total of 70 respondents were recruited. Data was collected using interview schedule and questionnaires. The collected qualitative data was analyzed thematically whereas the quantitative data was analyzed through statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software and both presented through quotes and tables respectively. The research findings revealed that SLPs' counseling skills were acquired not only in the SLP curriculum in which counseling skills were embedded, but also from additional trainings and professional development courses they undertook. It further noted that despite the SLPs expression of comfort while incorporating counseling in their interventions, they encountered difficulties in its application. The study found that PWCD and their caregivers viewed the SLPs as being competent in providing counseling during the intervention process. The study recommends that policy makers and curriculum developers incorporate a structured and intensive curriculum on counseling skills for SLPs.

Keywords: Speech therapists; Communication disorders; Patients; Caregivers.

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I. Introduction

Background Information

Counseling is a vital part of any clinical work and in every clinical encounter, counseling skills are applied either intentionally or spontaneously (Luterman, 2008). Flasher and Fogle, (2012) define counseling in speech-language-pathology as a helping, interactive relationship where the clinician's purpose is to assist the client and their family in understanding the communication, hearing or swallowing disorder and its impact on the client's life including prevention, management, adjustment or coping with the presenting disorders. It also assists the clinician in understanding the different etiological factors behind a patient's communication challenges (Dantuma, 2020). ASHA (2016) states that counseling is within the scope of practice for SLPs. It further explains that the role of the SLP within the counseling process includes issues with emotional reactions, feelings, thoughts and behaviors related to communication, swallowing and feeding disorders.

According to ASHA, (1993), a communication disorder is characterized by impairment in receiving, processing, sending, or comprehending verbal, nonverbal, or graphic symbols, speech and/or communication. It can affect hearing, speech and/or language, ranges from mild to profound and can exist on its own or with other disorders. It may be acquired or developmental and affects both adults and children.

Among adults, one of the most common acquired communication disorders affecting them, usually as a result of damage or injury to specific areas of the brain is aphasia. Aphasia is an acquired language disorder that results in the inability to comprehend or express thoughts or ideas using language due to damage to the left hemisphere of the brain. Thus, affecting the person's communicative and social functioning, quality of life and that of the caregiver (Worrall, Papathanasiou & Sherratt, 2013). According to Brumfitt (2006), people with Aphasia (PWA) experience a variety of negative psychosocial issues in addition to the language disorder which makes it vital for SLPs to apply counseling skills for the management of PWA to ensure the effectiveness of the

treatment and their psychosocial well-being. During such interactions where the client feels vulnerable, responding appropriately may facilitate rapport building thus enhancing the therapy process.

In the U.S., a study by Simmons-Mackie and Damico, (2011) on aphasia treatment by SLPs found that aphasia therapy sessions are potential counseling situations as PWA who have difficulties communicating with others, exhibit negative psychosocial effects and that SLPs often have the appropriate skills to understand and support them thus opening up the sessions to a potential outlet to vent out and discuss their worries and decisions. On the contrary, a study in Australia by Sekhon, Oates, Kneebone and Rose (2019), on contemporary training of SLPs in addressing the psychological well-being of PWA found that SLPs lack knowledge, skill and confidence in counseling PWA.

In Kenya, the 2019 census from Kenya National Bureau Statistics (KNBS, 2019) shows that 2.2% of Kenyans are persons with disability (PWDs) and that a little over 100,000 of those having communication disorders, with 0.1% or 4,397 out of Nairobi city county's 4,397,073 residents. It is important to note that this data is only for individuals aged 5 and above as children below 5 years of age were excluded yet they represent the group presenting with communication delays. Research shows that caregivers of children with communication disorders play an important role in intervention and that the degree of their involvement is a predictor of the improved outcome of therapy (Kaiser & Roberts, 2013). Similarly, among adults with communication disorders, PWA and their caregivers play a significant role in the success of clinical interventions for communication disorders. Therefore, their psychological well-being is crucial during the intervention process. However, research on counseling skills of SLPs and its application in the intervention process to address the psychosocial issues of clients and their caregivers is scarce. The purpose of this study therefore was to assess the level of training of speech therapists in counseling skills in intervention among people with communication disorders in Nairobi City County.

Statement of the Problem

Counseling is an integral part of any clinical intervention due to its contribution to helping individuals and families adjust and cope with their feelings about a disorder or situation (Flasher & Fogle, 2012). Kaderavek, Laux, and Mills (2004) emphasize the importance of applying counseling skills during clinical intervention for client growth. According to Kaderavek et al (2004), the use of counseling skills aids patients in feeling heard and understood. Additionally, patients feel empowered to make informed decisions and their coping level increases. However, a lack of a positive relationship between patients and SLPs, often built through SLPs counseling skills, may negatively impact the therapy process thus, leading to patients not following the recommendations by the SLP which consequently hinder their progress (Manasco, 2020). According to Brumfitt (2006), communication disorders result in psychological and social challenges for the patient and the caregiver thus requiring some level of counseling from the SLPs. This was echoed by a study done in Kenya by Abong'o, Abuom and Muthee (2021) on voice disorders and their psychological impact which revealed that both the family and PWCD experience negative psychosocial impacts such as increased anxiety levels, low self-esteem and low confidence. The study, however, did not go further into describing how SLPs handle the negative emotions of the client in the intervention. Despite the critical role of counseling in speech therapy among PWCDs, it is not clear how SLPs acquire counseling skills and whether or not they use counseling skills in their speech therapy sessions in the Kenyan context. Additionally, it is unknown how SLPs in Kenya handle the psychological issues that PWCD present during speech therapy sessions. The use of a multidisciplinary approach is essential in the intervention for communication disorders. Mental Health Professionals (MHPs) may not be well versed in the challenges the PWCD face to adequately address their psychological issues and may need to collaborate with SLPs. To ensure holistic care, SLPs should apply counseling skills in their intervention or make referrals to MHPs where necessary. Whether provided by SLPs or MHPs, counseling plays a crucial role in the intervention process. In consideration of the importance of a positive therapeutic relationship and the application of counseling skills, this study sought to assess the level of training in counseling skills among SLPs during clinical intervention for PWCD.

Study Objective

The objective of the study was to assess the acquisition and use of counseling skills by speech therapists in interventions among people with communication disorders in Nairobi City County-Kenya.

Significance of the Study

Research on counseling skills use among speech therapists is limited therefore, the findings of this study may add to knowledge and provides more literature on the extent and use of counseling skills in speech therapy. It may also be referenced by researchers for further studies on this subject. This study may provide insight to SLPs on how to incorporate counseling skills in their intervention for communication disorders. It may also provide insight on the appropriate counseling skills to use in intervention for people with communication disorder to ensure effectiveness of the therapy. It may lead to development of clinical guidelines for SLPs to address the

psychosocial well-being of PWCD. The study may benefit stakeholders such as curriculum developers to incorporate curricula on counseling for speech therapists.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Rogerian Person-Centered Approach and the Person-Centered Care theoretical framework. The proponent of the Person-Centered theory was Carl Rogers in 1978 (Rodgers, 1979). Rodgers proposed that individuals have resources within themselves for self-understanding, self-concept and self-directed behavior. These resources are genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy (Rogers, 1979). The person-centered approach gave rise to person-centered care. Person-centered care theoretical framework was developed by Brendan McCormack and Tanya McCance in 2006. Its fundamental objective is to develop a therapeutic relationship between the patient, family and the clinician (McCormack, & McCance, 2006).

According to the person-centered approach, a positive relationship between the therapist and patient is essential for the patient to achieve the therapeutic goals. The theories applied to this study as it described the importance of the therapeutic relationship between the client, therapist and caregivers which is important for effective clinical intervention.

II. Methodology

Area of Study

The study was conducted in Nairobi City County since it is the location where majority of practicing SLPs in Kenya are based according to data from the Association of Speech-Language-Therapists Kenya website (ASLTK, 2023). Therefore, majority of caregivers and PWCD come to Nairobi City County to seek speech therapy services.

Research Design

The research methodology was the mixed research approach as the respondents shared their personal views and experiences. According to Orodho (2009), descriptive survey design involves obtaining data from respondents by using interviews or administering questionnaires. To obtain comprehensive knowledge on the phenomenon, the qualitative research data collection method included structured interview schedules.

Population and Sampling Design

The research purposively sampled 10 SLPs which is 100% of the practicing population of SLPs in Nairobi city county (ASLTK, 2023). From the 10 SLPs, all were treating both adult patients and pediatrics. The number of PWCD was determined by the number of patients the SLP is treating.

Data Collection

The study adopted interviews as the main data collection technique. Permits from relevant authorities were sought. The researcher sought consent from the respondents prior to the data collection. The respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity before the data collection process.

The researcher contacted the SLPs through a telephone call so as to obtain consent for participation, and set up an appointment for a face-to-face interview. Some SLPs preferred telephone interviews. Structured questions were utilized in the interview, and the SLPs' responses were audio recorded and later transcribed. A single interview took 30 minutes to complete. The data collection exercise among SLPs was conducted within a week.

III. Results And Discussions

Acquisition of Counseling Skills by Speech Therapists

In order to establish how speech therapists acquire counseling skills, data was collected using a structured interview among the speech therapists. The respondents were asked relevant questions under two themes: acquisition and application. The study sought to establish the speech therapists' mode of acquisition of counseling and practical application of counseling skills in interventions. It further sought to determine whether the SLPs engaged in continuous professional development in counseling. The findings are subsequently summarized, presented and discussed under these two themes. Findings on training in counseling of speech therapists are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Speech Therapists' Mode of Acquisition of Counseling Skills

Formal Training	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
No response	2	20.0
Yes	4	40.0
No	4	40.0
Total	10	100.0

Nature of Formal Training		
No response	2	20.0
Embedded within SLP curriculum	6	60.0
Degree	1	10.0
Higher diploma	1	10.0
Total	10	100.0
Counseling skills acquisition	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Yes	5	50.0
No	5	50.0
Total	10	100.0
Continuous development program		
Yes		
No	6	60.0
Total	4	40.0
	10	100.0

From the findings on Table 3.1, 40% of the SLPs indicated that they had received formal training in counseling, with a further 40% indicating that they had no formal training. This indicates that there was an average level of formal training in counseling among speech therapists, with a considerable number of speech therapists having a training gap in counseling. A further 60% of the speech therapists indicated that counseling skills were embedded in speech therapy training curriculum, while 10% had been trained at degree and diploma levels. These findings imply that formal training in counseling for SLPs is mostly embedded within the speech therapy curriculum as opposed to a stand-alone course, pointing out to a lack of proper structure in counseling training for speech therapists. The current findings are consistent with a study conducted in the US by Doud, et al., (2020) which found that there is a lack of consistency in incorporating counseling across speech therapy programs. Furthermore, the study found that there was inadequate structure to guide counseling program content and also limited research to back up best practices about teaching techniques, content or general curriculum.

The findings further established that 50% of the speech therapists had been able to acquire counseling skills through additional training, with another 50% noting that they had not been able to acquire counseling skills. This gap in counseling skills may be explained by a lack of standardized and structured counseling training for speech therapists. In respect to this, a study by Sekhon, et al (2019) in Australia, on current training in counseling for SLPs to address the psychological well-being of PWA established that SLPs lack of knowledge, skill and confidence in counselling people with post-stroke aphasia patients which was also attributed to lack of counseling training.

From the findings, it was also established that 60% of the speech therapists engaged in continuous development programs focused in acquisition of counseling skills. These findings imply that beyond formal training in counseling embedded in the SLP curriculum, the therapists are further able to acquire requisite counseling skills through professional development. This is further supported by a study by Thomas, Ravi and Gunjawate (2023) study on understanding perspectives and experiences of SLPs in India found that majority of the SLPs primary sources for counseling information was discussion with colleagues or friends. Other sources included graduate coursework, seminars, conferences, journals and workshops.

The above findings indicate that speech therapists were averagely trained in counseling with majority of the training in counseling being embedded in speech therapy curriculum. A significant gap also exists in acquisition of counseling skills which compels a majority of speech therapists to engage in continuous development programs to fill the gap.

The results on the question of speech therapists' application of counseling skills in interventions for people with communication disorders are presented in table 3.2

Table 3.2 Speech Therapists' Application of Counseling Skills

Counseling incorporation	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Yes	10	100.0
Total	10	100.0
Nature of Therapeutic approach		
Focusing on feelings	10	100.0
Attending skills	10	100.0
Addressing negative emotion	10	100.0
Genuineness	10	100.0
Unconditional positive regard	10	100.0
Empathy	10	100.0
Making appropriate referrals	10	100.0

From the findings on Table 3.2, all (100%) the sampled SLPs indicated that they incorporated counseling skills as part of speech therapy intervention, by using techniques such as attending skills, focusing on feelings, paraphrasing negative emotions, being genuine to their patients and making appropriate referrals. These findings

could imply that there was a high intake of counseling in treatment of communication disorders, and that the collaboration between speech therapists with counselors and psychologists ensured that a variety of counseling techniques were incorporated as highlighted above.

Data from the open-ended questions further highlighted the use of counseling in speech therapy as captured in the responses of some of the SLPs:

One SLP therapist noted:

"You cannot separate between speech therapy and counseling. The person should be mentally stable before sessions begin to ensure the client is settled as the client may not achieve anything if not."

"It is sometimes hard to handle the emotions. I allow the client to go through their emotions and if I am able to support, I do. If not, I immediately refer the client."

Another SLP indicated that:

"I share and identify with the client, out of my own experience especially on Traumatic Brain Injury. For parents starting the journey, I connect them with other parents and support groups."

Similarly, another SLP noted that:

"I give them time to vent and explain how they feel. If they want to cry, I give them time to cry. I ask them to talk about what is causing their emotions."

These findings indicate that the SLPs were able to apply diverse counseling skills in the course of their interventions to the extent to which they felt competent and further referred cases that they felt unable to manage to mental health professionals. This was significant in helping the patients deal with emotional aspects of their communication disorders. These findings are also in tandem with a study conducted in Australia by Rose, Ferguson, Power, Togher and Worrall (2014) on current aphasia rehabilitation practices of SLPs, which found that counseling is practiced frequently in aphasia rehabilitation, however, the SLPs reported that they are underprepared for the role. Despite counseling being part of the SLPs responsibility, they lack the skill due to a lack of counseling-specific training in communication disorders. The SLPs preferred counseling initiatives such as referrals to MHPs, doing joint sessions with MHPs and engaging stroke case managers for the counseling role. These further emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts including the referrals as a way of ensuring counseling is incorporated in speech therapy interventions. These findings are consistent with that of Johnson and Hall (2023) who established that SLPs who had completed a counseling course reported increased confidence in the application of counselling across all domains.

Similarly, in the African context, a study by Nash et al. (2022) on the methods used by SLPs to provide psychosocial care for PWA in South Africa also found that while most SLPs assist PWA's mental health by using counseling techniques, they feel underqualified and lack the confidence to do so, further underscoring the importance of collaborative efforts with mental health specialists as indicated in the current findings.

The patients indicated that the SLPs use counseling skills in their intervention. Thus, demonstrating that most patients felt that SLPs were able to use basic counseling skills such as attending skills and empathy in addressing their psychosocial needs. Thereby, encouraging clients to continue with the sessions. Similarly, the caregivers indicated that SLPs apply counseling skills in their interventions such as unconditional positive regard, genuineness, reflection and calm tone. However, majority of the caregivers related more with the SLPs who exhibited genuineness and unconditional positive regard as it makes them feel understood.

IV. Conclusions And Recommendation

Conclusion

The study concluded that the speech therapists counseling skills were acquired not only in the SLP curriculum but also from additional training and professional development courses. Speech therapists faced difficulties in the application of counseling skills in their intervention for people with communication disorders despite expressing comfort in its incorporation. Therefore, it is vital to incorporate counseling skills in the SLP curriculum to ensure increased confidence when applying it. The caregivers and patients felt that the SLPs appropriately applied counseling skills during their intervention process thus deeming them competent. Based on the findings, the study concludes that the speech therapists are able to offer basic counseling interventions to both clients and caregivers.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Policy

- 1) Policy makers and curriculum developers should incorporate a more structured and intensive curriculum on counseling skills for speech therapists in the speech language pathology course. It should be included in the course work and during internship.

- 2)The study recommends development of standardized tools that can assess the counseling skills of SLPs. The tools to be used to identify areas that may need improvement thus ensuring that the SLP provides psychosocial support during interventions.

Recommendations for Practitioners

- 1)SLPs should work more closely with MHPs to improve their own counseling skills and learn new skills to be able to offer emotional support to their patients.

Recommendations for Future Research

- 1)Additional studies should conduct longitudinal research exploring how SLPs counseling skills impact the long-term outcomes in PWCDs. Thus, understanding the long-term effects of speech therapy on psychosocial and communication improvement.

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