

COUNSELLING ADOLESCENTS IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: ISSUES AND NEW PERSPECTIVES

Olusegun Fatai ADEBOWALE

Department of Counselling and Human Development
Faculty of Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria
oluadefat@oauife.edu.ng, oluadefat@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author: Olusegun Fatai ADEBOWALE (oluadefat@oauife.edu.ng)

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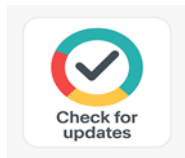
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Abstract

Keyword:

Adolescents, counselling, adolescents focused intervention strength bombardment, tertiary institutions, strategies

The paper explores the meaning of adolescence in diverse context and terms. It analyzes the developmental peculiarities and experiences of the Nigerian adolescents and their counselling needs particularly in Nigerian tertiary institutions of learning. It therefore explored adaptable approaches to counselling adolescents in Nigeria universities taking into cognizance the adolescents' counselling needs, new approaches and perspectives that can be adopted in counselling adolescents in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This was operationalized by adopting the conceptual and literature-based approach, that rely primarily on existing knowledge, theories, concept and published literatures. Relevant literature on adolescent development and counselling practices in tertiary institutions were reviewed from scholarly journals, books, and policy documents. It focuses particularly on redefining, refining, critiquing and clarifying different ideas about process and approaches adopted to provide counselling support for the postmodern adolescents in the Nigerian universities. It also presents the new perspectives for counselling adolescents in Nigerian tertiary institutions.



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Introduction

The term "Adolescence", was derived from a Latin word 'adolescere' which means "to grow up" (Rahman & Yunus, 2021). It is a term commonly used to refer to the transitional stage of physical and psychological transformation that accompanies human development during the period from puberty to adulthood (Bussing, Hussong, Grobe-Onnebrin & von Gontard, 2021). This definition ignores any

specific delineation of the period of the transition, probably because such transition is gradual and uncertain, more so, the time span is not the same for every person, but most adolescents eventually become mature adults (Xia, Master, Eckstein, Wilbrecht & Collins, 2020). Steinberg (2023, Pg. 4) likened adolescence to a bridge between childhood and adulthood over which individuals must pass before they take their places as full-grown, responsible adults (Also Chavan et al, 2024).

He argued that, although, most people place the beginning of adolescence at the time at which children begin to physically mature into individuals capable of reproduction, such assumption can only be described as a misnomer. Since puberty actually means to be physically capable of procreating, but the physical changes associated with hitting puberty begin quite a few years before children become fertile (Klein, Emerick, Sylvester & Vogt, 2017).

Other researchers described adolescence in terms of time span. For instance, the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2014) identifies adolescence as the period in human growth and development that occurs from ages 10 to 19, while other researchers posited that the time period of adolescence has been extended to include the ages of 10 through the mid-twenties (Turnbull, 2024; Jones, et al., 2023; Sawyer, et al., 2018), with most researchers dividing the age span into early (10 to 13), middle (14 to 17) and late (18 to mid-twenties) adolescent. Also, Chavan et al, (2024) posited that in Western culture adolescence refers to the time period from puberty to age 18 or 21, but non-Western cultures tend to mark the beginning of adulthood with rites of passage often following the onset of puberty (Magampa, et al, 2026; Schroeder et al, 2022).

In the view of some researchers, the definition of adolescence as the time period between the onset of puberty and age 21 lacks validity and fails to address the cultural differences, historical influences, and individual expressions of this transitional stage from childhood to adulthood (Buchanan, et al, 2023). The author concluded that the task of defining adolescence might remain a confusing one due to the fact that adolescents themselves are influenced by various factors that determine when childhood ends and adulthood begins. In Nigeria, according to Adebowale & Popoola (2011), university students fall into two transitory developmental stages of late adolescence and early adulthood and that this informs their developmental challenges and hence, counselling needs.

Perhaps, the foregoing accounts for an assertion by Rahman and Yunus (2021) that the maxim “adolescence begins in biology and ends in culture” reflects the varying understanding of when adolescence ends it can be interpreted to mean that the ages that young people might enter full adulthood and possibly take up adult responsibilities would vary widely across cultures (Tsipianitis, Mandellos & Groumpos, 2019). The WHO (2014) however noted that, although, the biological determinants of adolescence are fairly universal, the duration and defining characteristics of this period may vary across time, cultures, and socioeconomic situations. Also, many changes have occurred in the nature of adolescence over the past century such as earlier onset of puberty, later age of marriage, urbanization, global communication, and changing sexual attitudes and behaviors.

Statement of the Research Problem

Counselling adolescents in Nigerian universities have been known to be quite challenging. This is partly because of the longstanding but substantial systemic cultural and operational issues such as persistent and chronic underfunding, stigmatization of clients and severe shortage of qualified personnel (Asemota, Edinoh, Attah, 2025). Also, these are amplified by developmental vulnerabilities commonly associated with this life stage such as identity formation, peer pressure and high susceptibility to mental issues like anxiety, depression, substance use, suicidal ideation and trauma from insecurity and economic hardship (Chenube, 2025).

Meanwhile, counselling services are currently being developed to leverage all the resources that the computer and internet offers with the view to expanding access, promote convenience and reduce cost. These also increase the gamut of challenges counselling of adolescents in Nigeria may confront. This can be in the areas of digital divide and other challenges to online counselling, ethical, legal and privacy compliance gaps, exacerbating socio-economic and security pressures as well as ability to adapt the services to the fourth industrial revolution and broadening artificial intelligence integration.

A need therefore arises to explore adaptable approaches to counselling adolescents in Nigeria universities taking into cognizance the adolescents' counselling needs, new approaches and perspectives that can be adopted in counselling adolescents in Nigerian tertiary institutions

Research Objectives

The study was designed to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To analyze the developmental peculiarities of Nigerian Adolescents
- ii. To justify the developmental peculiarities along the counselling needs of the adolescents
- iii. To identify postmodern issues and perspectives in counselling adolescents in Nigerian tertiary institutions

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual and literature-based approach. This approach refers to methodologies that rely primarily on existing knowledge, theories, concept and published literatures rather than generating new primary data through experiments survey, observations, interview or field work (Snyder, 2019; Luft et al, 2022). In this particular case, relevant literature on adolescent development and counselling practices in tertiary institutions was reviewed from scholarly journals, books, and policy documents. The review focuses particularly on redefining, refining, critiquing and clarifying different ideas about process and approaches adopted to provide counselling support for the postmodern adolescents in the Nigerian universities.

Findings

Developmental peculiarities of Nigerian adolescents

Generally, adolescence represents a period of significant growth and changes in the individual. Mastorci, et al, (2024) posited that the individual adolescent experiences rapid physical growth and changes, accompanied by shifts in cognitive and emotional capacities as well as new cultural and societal opportunities and expectations. Besides physical and sexual maturation, other experiences of the adolescents include movement toward social and economic independence, and development of identity, the acquisition of skills needed to carry out adult relationships and roles, and the capacity for abstract reasoning (WHO, 2014). It warned that, although, adolescence is a time of tremendous growth and potential, it is also a time of considerable risk during which social contexts can exert powerful influences. To effectively harness such potentials and minimize inherent risks and their consequences, therefore, the services of helping professionals are required.

The Nigerian adolescence may be said to typify one of the non-western definitions in which its description, nature and management are steeped in cultural differences and historical influences. Since the adolescent physical, cognitive, and emotional development occurs within social institutions, including families, friends, and schools, understanding the nature of development necessitates understanding the social contexts in which it occurs (Wang, et al, 2019; Foster et al, 2017)

Literature documents how different African cultural groups consider the period of adolescence an important one. For instance, Schroeder et al, (2022) opines that to indicate the importance of adolescent period amongst different African groups, there is entrenchment of cultural practices to mark its phase. He posited that this is accomplished through the prescriptions of formal but extremely significant set of ceremonies to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood and it is relative to cultures. Some cultures consider the initiation a form of education for an adolescent towards acquiring the knowledge of behaviours and attitudes expected of adult members of the community. Also, Okeke (2022) described how in some Nigerian cultures, adolescence is marked by qualification for certain initiation rites, and people publicly celebrate the transition into adulthood. They argued that the individual was previously regarded as a child before the event and suddenly after the initiation, this concept automatically changes and s/he is given an adult status.

In Nigeria, literature attests that 43 per cent of the whole population comprises people belonging to the age group that captures the period of adolescence (FRN, National Youth Policy, 2019). According to WHO (2025), the Nigerian government claims that there has been a growing recognition of the need to respond effectively to the health and developmental challenges of young people. In this respect, the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) developed a National Adolescent Health Policy in 1995 and A National Adolescent Reproductive Health Strategic Framework was also developed in 1999, in which reproductive health was identified as a key issue in adolescents.

The framework, in fact, owned up that no strategic framework was however produced for other priority areas of adolescent health and development indicated in the 1995 policy. For instance, research reports that health care for this age group (adolescents) tends not to be receiving priority attention, such that many adolescents grope in the dark about matters concerning their health and survival and even transfer this gross ignorance into adulthood (Ikuteyijo et al, 2025; Ojeahere, 2025).

Adolescents' counselling needs in Nigerian tertiary institutions

In Nigeria, the tertiary educational stage seems to be the final transition of the individual into adulthood and the world of work as they get more separated from parents, exploring and defining their independence (Adebowale, 2013). At this stage, they are deciding who they are, what they do well, and what they will do when they graduate, evaluating their strengths, skills and abilities. They are searching for a place to belong and rely on peer acceptance and feedback, facing increased pressures regarding risky behaviours involving sex, alcohol and drugs while exploring the boundaries of more acceptable behavior and mature, meaningful relationships.

In the recent past, there have been strident reports of acts of indiscipline and misconducts on the part of university students in Nigeria. Research suggests that there is no gainsaying the fact that indiscipline has assumed a dangerous and frightening dimension among students of tertiary institution in Nigeria, such acts like examination malpractices, demonstration and rioting, secret cult activities, drug addiction, sexual immorality and theft (Rufai et al, 2017; Osaro & Ajuru, 2025; Egwu et al, 2025). The authors warned that these problems are so serious that they require urgent attention as no serious intellectual, socio-political, economic, scientific and technological development can be engendered in the society where indiscipline prevails.

Omemu (2025) highlighted steps that are known to have been taken so far to curb cultism and concluded that, to curb such organizations by the use of force has proved difficult over the years, since it has not been easy to know who to arrest. Also, expulsion from school and banning cult member may has not proven to be an effective panacea to the reasons identified for why young people join cult groups.

Ayodele, Isiaka and Nasirudeen, (2025) also expressed a bitter view of the way university students in

Nigeria raise funds through prostitution or by abetting the act. Otuchikere (2008) reported a Leadership Sunday survey carried out in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory which reveals that many young women who have taken to prostitution as a means of livelihood actually went through the four walls of universities, polytechnics and colleges of education. Also, Ikechukwu-Ilomuanya, Onyechi & Iwuagwu (2018) posited that hostels of tertiary institutions in Nigeria have been labeled as "glorified brothels" as many students, aided and abetted by the hall porters engage in high risk sexual behaviour.

Students' militancy in Nigerian universities has been reported as one of the most visible perennial problems of significance when compared with other social vices in Nigeria university campuses such as campus cult activities, examination malpractices, and drug abuse and addiction (Etaneki & Okolie 2020). Incessant incidents of unrest seem to affect the scope of areas being covered and the content of courses in the school curriculum (Anho, Kporhobo & Aweto, 2023). Apart from this, Akparep (2022) and Viatonu et al (2018) reported that crisis in tertiary institutions, over the years, have led to breakdown of law and order, disturbance of public peace and loss of lives and properties. Although, youth restiveness among youths can be described as a global concern, that of Nigeria has become a behaviour pattern which has degenerated into a topical global issue as a device used to get what the youths want from the relevant authorities (Igbo & Ikpa, 2013). Also, Chika and Onyene (2010) asserted that although, youth resistance to conditions, issues and unwelcomed leadership regimes dates back to 1934 when Herbert Macaulay floated a political party to kick against dependency with fellow elite youths that had contact with the West, recent media reports indicate cases of armed conflicts, killings, suicide bombing, wanton destruction of lives and properties kidnappings, lootings, pipeline destructions among others in most Nigerian States.

This trend has been attributed mainly to structural unemployment and intense deprivation (Igbo & Ikpa, 2013). Ezebuilo (2023) observed that composite unemployment and structural unemployment results in talents not being used where they are available, hence idle mind definitely becomes "the devil's workshop". Similarly, Ezedikachi (2020) observed that such psychological variables and deprivation are the basic causes of conflict and restiveness of any kind and that the more widespread and intense deprivation is among members of a population, the greater is the magnitude of violence in one form or the other

Drug abuse and addiction are other forms of indiscipline commonly perpetrated by students in Nigerian higher institutions of learning and which will require both individual and group counselling. Tracing the path of substance use among students of tertiary institutions in Lagos State, Olanrewaju et al (2022) found that at least 45.7% of the students are found to be involved in drug abuse, mostly abused were alcohol (61.5%), cigarettes (54.5%), tramadol (35%), codeine cough syrup (33%), shisha (30.5%) and cannabis (25.5%). The authors found that the increase in the consumatory activities of youths in Nigerian institutions, such as drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and taking stimulant drugs are rapidly coming to dominate their lives and that they depend on artificial substitutes for a wider range of emotional and behavioural satisfaction. They also found that some of these problems of addiction arise from human personality factor, in terms of addictive attitude exhibited by individuals in the society. Ibiwoye and Adeleke (2011) quoted many research works which described the drug abuse situation in Nigeria's tertiary institutions as particularly worrisome and associated with anti-social activities in these institutions. They argued that the efforts of the various organs of government in Nigeria, particularly the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) to curb the problem appears to have come to naught, despite the fact that a huge proportion of these institutions' annual budget that could have been used to improve their funding situation is deployed to maintaining a large security unit.

Other challenges to adolescents and young adults abound in university campuses. Counselling against the spread of sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, sickle cell anemia, kidney diseases, diabetes, breast cancer and so on are very essential for developing healthy young adults in

Nigerian university undergraduates. Research also posits that many of this young also go into unsuitable career paths as a result of ignorance, inexperience, peer pressure, insistence of parents and teachers or perhaps because of the prestige attached to certain vocations (Adebowale, 2014). All these challenges now added to academic and educationally related challenges and difficulties such as change of course, career planning, exploration and choice, social interaction, identity formation and development, sexual harassment and enticement, use of technological equipment and materials like internet and its applications. All of these only point to the urgent and timely attention of school counsellors, if the modern undergraduates are to be able to take their pride of place in the scheme of things.

Approaches to adolescent counselling

Generally, adolescent counselling is intended to help adolescents make sense of their feelings and behaviour. They often feel stuck between wanting independence and still needing guidance. They are more likely than adults to make decisions without considering the consequences and usually feel invincible (Bollyn, 2013). Consequently, counsellors have to understand their developmental challenges in order to provide them with effective counselling.

Abidogun (2022) suggested that although undergraduates could be expected to battle with some difficulties than they could personally cope with, research also reveals that most students were reluctant in seeking help from counsellors. He reported that younger adolescents were more interested in seeking counselling on personal-social concerns than older ones and that generally students were more interested in discussing educational/vocational problems with counsellors. He expressed the tendency for adolescents to be evasive and minimize an originally very intensive problem and warned that the effect could be heavy on students' commitment to learning.

García-Carrión, Villarejo-Carballido & Villardón-Gallego (2019) described effective approaches to adolescents' mental health counselling as adolescents focused intervention and categorized them in to three broad groups – individual therapeutic approaches, group interventions and parent focused programs. According to the authors, individual therapeutic approaches include approaches like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which has been found to be the most 'efficacious' intervention for anxiety in adolescents and is considered to be 'probably efficacious' or promising for depression in adolescents. Another useful approach according to the authors is Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) which has also been found to be effective in reducing symptoms of depression in adolescents and is possibly more effective than CBT. They also mentioned Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TF-CBT) as a model of psychotherapy that focuses on the unique needs of children 4 to 18 years of age who are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other problems related to traumatic life experiences, particularly sexual abuse. They reported that there is strong evidence that TF-CBT is the most appropriate intervention for PTSD, anxiety and depression in sexually abused children and likely to be effective for children exposed to other traumas as well.

The second group, the group intervention is basically designed to make the adolescents realize that they are not alone in their problems and getting them to help each other out. The adolescent may not respond to an adult, even if she is a counsellor or a therapist when discussing certain kind of issues. Using other adolescents who have struggled with the same problems can be extremely effective when working with an adolescent population.

Another variant of this is referred to as strength bombardment. According to Rush (2014) this is a technique for counselling adolescents that focuses on self-evaluation versus what others think. During strength bombardment, the adolescent lists and discusses what he views as personal strengths. From there, other members in the group list additional strengths that were missed and help the adolescent create a future goal of what he can accomplish and achieve, thereby instilling self-esteem and confidence.

The parent focused programs have two broad aims (García-Carrión, Villarejo-Carballido & Villardón-Gallego, 2019). According to the authors, one of them is to modify the risk factors of coercive family interaction and poor parenting which play a role in causing and/or maintaining externalising behaviour problems and delinquency while the other is to enhance parent-child communication and connectedness and improve parental supervision and monitoring. They also opined that family focused interventions are based on social-ecological models and hold that family functioning and interactions may cause, maintain or worsen adolescent conduct disorder or problem behaviour such as substance misuse.

Procedurally, certain approaches are recommended when counselling adolescents generally. The American Psychological Association (2002) recommended the following:

- i. The counsellor is expected to engage adolescents with nonthreatening questions. One or two questions should be posed at a given time and moreover, only questions that help adolescents to define their identities should be asked. It is also recommended that counsellors should listen nonjudgmentally and should listen more than speaking. This enables the adolescent to realize that the counsellor values his or her opinions, and thus to trust the counsellor more.
- ii. The counsellor should ask open-ended questions, questions that require more than a yes or no response. This helps the adolescent to think through ideas and options.
- iii. “why” questions should be avoided, as they tend to put people on the defensive. The counsellor can rephrase the questions to get at what the adolescent is thinking rather than the reason for something the adolescent has said or done. For example, instead of asking, “Why did you say that?” the counsellor can say instead: “You seemed to be really trying to get across a point when you did that. Can you tell me more about what you mean?”
- iv. The counsellor should match the adolescent’s emotional state, unless it is hostile. If the adolescent seems enthusiastic or sad, the counsellors’ responses should reflect his or her mood.
- v. The counsellor should casually model rational decision-making strategies. S/he can discuss how s/he once arrived at a decision. S/he should explain, for example, how s/he defined a problem, generated options, anticipated positive and negative consequences, made the decision, and evaluated the outcome. Adolescents have relatively short attention spans, so one should be brief, and the chosen topic should be relevant to adolescents.
- vi. The counsellor should discuss ethical and moral problems that are in the news. The adolescents should be encouraged to think through the issues out loud. Without changing his or her point of view, wonder aloud about how others might differ in their perspective on the issue and what might influence these differences.

Discussion:

New perspectives in counselling adolescents in Nigerian tertiary institutions

The contemporary Nigerian adolescents in tertiary institutions are subjected to different intensely mind-boggling experiences that may not have been the same with the experiences of those in this category in earlier decades. An interaction with some of them reveals their mindset and their perception of the type of care and interest the nation probably has for them. For instance, it is believed that admission into tertiary institution was less stressful cheaper and more dignifying than what it presently is.

There was separate examination for admission into the University (UME) and the polytechnics/Colleges of Education (PCE). They had choice to select three universities in UME and similar thing occur during PCE. Later the choices were narrowed down to two universities and/or polytechnic and now to only one university, polytechnic and college of education suggesting that when the candidate is poor s/he will fit into polytechnic or poorer still to fit into college of education. Once a candidate misses this chance s/he

is condemned to one year “stay away” from school. Worst still, even when the candidate is able to scale these hurdles, s/he is subjected to another one in the Post UTME examinations and then the cut-off imbroglio.

Consequently, these candidates see admission into tertiary institutions as a matter of luck, leading to emergence of wonder centres who exploit them and their parents on the promises of “Easy-easy” admission magic. This also gives way to very brazen attempt at examination malpractices involving even parents. Candidates who may not be able to afford such fees become highly susceptible to mental ailments like depression, anxiety and so on.

Contemporary young people are also getting exposed to more personality-changing experiences like youth restiveness, peer pressure, online pornography, cyber stalking and bullying. They experience greater attraction toward religious and sectarian fundamentalism cum violence occasioned by crass materialistic models among religious leaders, little or no hope of future employment and perverted exposure to political criticisms. They also experience loss of sense of patriotism occasioned by loss of trust and reliance in government, school managers and even parents.

Despite all these they still find it difficult to approach the counsellors to seek help concerning the challenges they are confronting for fear of being mislabeled or of becoming laughing stock among their peers. However, their love for ICT equipment such as phones, Ipad, laptops and internet seem to be revolutionizing students’ attempts at establishing counselling relationship with the counsellor. Many adolescents are going for this approach because of the anonymity this approach provides. More so such help could be sought through their Iphone, smartphones, Ipads or laptops. It is also at the convenience of both the counsellor and the client.

Conclusion

Given the peculiarities of the nature and experiences of the average adolescents which commonly dovetail into young adulthood, particularly in Nigerian universities, the need arises for school counsellors not only to understand their nature and the challenges they are made to confront but also they need to be equipped with special strategies that can be used to help adolescents and other young people to navigate this period, smoothen their social interaction dynamics particularly with parents and launch them into the new realm of adult roles, responsibilities and privileges that the society entrusts on them.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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