

COUNSELLING NEEDS OF NIGERIAN COUPLES RELOCATING ABROAD: IMPLICATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELLING

¹YUSUF, J. , ²ADEDIRAN I.A., ³Araba, Kafayat Toyin & Olayemi Zanaib Oduola

¹*Department of Educational Management and Counselling,
Faculty of Education, Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Kwara State.
08033968703, jyusuf@alhikmah.edu.ng*

²*Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja
08136567766, iadediran@noun.edu.ng*

³*Department of Sociology and Criminology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Kwara State.
08038070219, tkaraba@alhikmah.edu.ng*

⁴*Federal University of Health Sciences, Ila Orangun
08062143039, olayemi.oduola@fuhsi.edu.ng*

Abstract

The increasing global mobility of individuals and families presents significant challenges to marital and familial well-being. Couples relocating abroad often experience a complex interplay of cultural adjustment, social isolation, financial strain, and identity shifts, leading to heightened conflict, communication breakdown, and a decline in relationship satisfaction. To effectively support Nigerian couples abroad, counsellors must consider cultural, relocation-related, and marital factors, and adapt their strategies accordingly. The following suggestions were made among others to support Nigerian couples relocating abroad: Counsellors should invest in continuous professional development to enhance cultural competence, stay abreast of best practices, and acquire specialized skills for working with relocating Nigerian couples. Relevant and Culturally Informed Strategies should be incorporated into counselling practices. Recognizing respect for cultural values and beliefs, including communication styles and conflict resolution approaches. There's need for collaboration with organizations to develop and promote culturally appropriate resources, such as books, articles, websites, and support groups, tailored to the needs of Nigerian immigrants among others

Keywords: Counselling needs, Relocation, Couples and Challenges.

Introduction

The allure of a better life, driven by economic opportunities, political instability, and educational aspirations, has spurred a significant wave of Nigerian migration to foreign shores. Among this growing diaspora, a substantial number are couples seeking to establish new lives abroad. While the promise of a brighter future beckons, relocation

often brings with it a complex web of challenges that can profoundly impact marital dynamics and family relationships. This paper examines the unique counselling needs of Nigerian couples relocating abroad, exploring the implications for marriage and family counselling within this increasingly relevant demographic.

The intersection of cultural adjustments, economic pressures, and the potential for social isolation creates a unique set of stressors for Nigerian couples navigating a new environment. Traditional counselling approaches, often rooted in Western cultural norms and perspectives, may not adequately address the specific needs and experiences of this population. This paper argues that a culturally informed approach to counselling, tailored to the complexities of relocation and cultural adaptation, is crucial for supporting the well-being and relationship satisfaction of these couples.

The increasing global mobility of individuals and families presents significant challenges to marital and familial well-being. Couples relocating abroad often experience a complex interplay of cultural adjustment, social isolation, financial strain, and identity shifts, leading to heightened conflict, communication breakdown, and a decline in relationship satisfaction. Despite the substantial impact on relationships, to the best of the researcher's knowledge there is a dearth of specialized resources and trained professionals equipped to address the unique counselling needs of these couples. While relocation offers opportunities for personal and professional growth, the cultural adjustment process can strain relationships. Couples relocating abroad often face communication barriers, clashing cultural values, and difficulties in establishing new support systems. This cultural dissonance can lead to misunderstandings, conflict, and a sense of alienation, putting a significant strain on marital bonds and requiring specialized counselling approaches.

Concept of Relocation

Relocation refers to the process of moving one's residence to a new location, characterized as a stressful and complex experience (Lee & Smith, 2017). Alternatively, it can be defined as the movement of individuals or groups from one geographic location to another, typically motivated by economic, social, political, or environmental factors (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022).

Common Motivation for Relocation

Many Nigerians relocate in search of higher salaries, improved job security, and better working conditions (Adesoji & Adedoyin, 2020). The pursuit of economic advancement often fuels this migration, especially in times of economic uncertainty (Cohen, 2019). Nigerians may relocate to pursue advanced degrees in fields not readily available in their home country, or to attend universities with prestigious reputations (Gueye, 2018). Some Nigerians prioritize a better quality of life abroad, seeking access to improved healthcare, educational opportunities, and recreational amenities (Nweke, 2021). Relocation can be driven by a desire to escape political instability, violence, and insecurity within Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast region, violent crime, kidnapping, and corruption has all contributed to migration (Balogun, 2020; Igberere & Onyenwe, 2020; Yusuf & Adebayo, 2020). A lack of representation in the political system, based on ethnicity or region, can lead to a sense of marginalization and motivate relocation (Okey, 2020). The impact of climate change, such as flooding and drought in rural areas, can disrupt livelihoods and push Nigerians to seek opportunities in more stable environments (Odunjo, Akinsiku, & Okediran, 2021). In some cases, Nigerians may relocate to escape religious persecution, such as the marginalization of minority religious groups in certain regions (Murtada, 2021).

Challenges Faced by Nigerian Couples Relocating Abroad

- **Identity Crisis:** Adjusting to a new culture can prompt identity reevaluation and a sense of cultural limbo (Sam, 2017). The contrast between collective family systems prevalent in some cultures and nuclear family structures common in others can intensify this dilemma. For immigrants, navigating relationships with extended family members in their home country while establishing new family connections abroad can generate tension, complicating family dynamics (Okeke, 2022).
- **Communication Styles:** Nigerian culture typically values indirect communication and harmony preservation, which can conflict with Western communication styles that emphasize directness and assertive expression (Adegbola & Odunola, 2015). This cultural divergence can lead to misunderstandings and challenges in interpersonal interactions.
- **Social Norms:** Nigerian culture prioritizes extended family ties, fostering close relationships and support networks among grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives. In contrast, Western cultures often focus on nuclear families, downplaying extended family connections. This cultural disparity poses challenges for couples maintaining relationships with their extended families in Nigeria while establishing new family ties abroad (Umeh, 2015). Additionally, Nigerian culture deeply respects elders, reflected in formal interactions and deference to older family members. Western cultures, however, tend to emphasize informal and egalitarian relationships with elders. Navigating these differences impacts family dynamics and relationships.

- ***Parenting Styles:*** Cultural differences in parenting styles, particularly the strong emphasis on respect for elders in Nigerian culture, can spark conflicts when raising children in a new cultural environment (Adeyemi & Olatoye, 2016). Specifically:
 1. Authority and discipline: Nigerian parents may prioritize obedience and respect, while Western societies emphasize autonomy and self-expression.
 2. Communication styles: Direct or indirect communication methods can vary across cultures.
 3. Family values: Cultural differences in family hierarchy, roles, and expectations can influence parenting.
- ***Economic Stress:*** The financial pressures of settling in a new country can significantly impact couples' well-being and relationship satisfaction. Finding employment, adjusting to a new financial system, and managing expenses in a foreign land can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and potential conflict over financial management. Nigerian couples often face challenges finding jobs that align with their skills and qualifications, potentially leading to underemployment, financial instability, and resentment (Adedeji & Babalola, 2018).
- ***Financial System:*** Immigrants often struggle to adjust to unfamiliar financial environments, such as new currencies, complex banking systems and stringent financial regulations. This transition can exacerbate financial anxiety (Onyemelukwe, 2013). Research emphasizes that understanding personal finance is vital for immigrants' economic stability, particularly those from developing nations, who may find navigating foreign financial systems daunting (Olusanya, 2019).

- **Visa Processes:** The complexities of immigration procedures, including visa renewals and citizenship applications, add another layer of stress and uncertainty (Olusanya, 2019).
- **Conflict:** Immigrant couples face unique stressors, including cultural adaptation, job insecurity, and financial management. These challenges can increase anxiety, frustration, and conflict, particularly when financial difficulties arise (Olusanya, 2019).
- **Communication:** Nigerian culture often emphasizes indirect communication, with a preference for subtle hints and avoiding direct confrontation. This contrasts with many Western cultures where direct and assertive communication is valued. This discrepancy can lead to misunderstandings: A Nigerian partner might interpret a direct approach as rude or aggressive. A Western partner might perceive indirect communication as unclear or evasive. Cultural differences in nonverbal communication, such as eye contact, personal space, and gestures, can further complicate communication. For example, a Nigerian partner might avoid direct eye contact as a sign of respect, while a Western partner might interpret this as a lack of engagement (Adegbola & Odunola, 2015). Research in 2020 underscores the importance of communication in navigating these challenges: "Strong communication skills are essential for couples to effectively address conflicts and build a harmonious relationship amidst the challenges of relocation." (Ogunbiyi, 2020)
- **Intimacy:** Adjusting to a new environment, navigating unfamiliar systems, and dealing with financial pressures can create significant stress and anxiety for couples. This heightened stress can lead to emotional exhaustion, making it

difficult to connect emotionally and physically (Ihekweba, 2021). Recent studies indicate that the stress of relocation can significantly impact couples' emotional and physical intimacy: "Navigating the challenges of relocation can often lead to increased stress and reduced levels of intimacy, both physically and emotionally." (Ihekweba, 2021).

- **Family Dynamics:** For Nigerian couples relocating abroad, maintaining ties with extended family and building new support networks poses significant challenges. The loss of strong community connections can lead to feelings of isolation, diminished support, and potential negative impacts on mental health and relationship satisfaction (Adedeji & Babalola, 2018).
- **Distance:** Relocating away from extended family can lead to emotional detachment, loneliness, and a sense of disconnection from cultural traditions, values, and heritage, impacting overall well-being (Umeh, 2015).
- **Cultural Differences:** Couples face obstacles when building new family relationships in a host country, potentially disrupting their support system and cultural adjustment. Cultural differences in family dynamics can lead to relationship tensions and conflicts, as highlighted in recent research (Okeke, 2022).
- **Financial Burden:** Couples may experience financial strain due to supporting family members in Nigeria, exacerbating their economic stress and potentially impacting their overall well-being (Onyemelukwe, 2013).
- **Discrimination:** The Ogundipe (2023) emphasizes that experiences of discrimination and racism are major contributors to mental health issues among Nigerian couples settling into new environments.

- ***Access to Services:*** Relocating Nigerian couples encounter significant barriers in accessing culturally competent mental health services and navigating complex healthcare systems, compromising their emotional well-being (Adeyemi & Olatoye, 2016). Recent research emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive support (Ogunyemi, 2024).

In light of these challenges, counselling can be a vital support system for Nigerian couples relocating abroad. Through counselling, couples can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances of their new environment, develop strategies for navigating relationship challenges, and explore their identities in the context of their new surroundings. Counselling is a goal-oriented, collaborative process between a trained counsellor and a client, aimed at promoting personal growth, self-awareness, and behavioural change (Kessler, 2020). Through a supportive and non-judgmental relationship, counsellors empower clients to explore and understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, and develop coping strategies to address challenges and achieve their goals. As defined by the American Counselling Association (ACA), "counselling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (ACA, 2020).

Benefits of Counselling to Couples Relocating Abroad

Counselling can be a valuable resource for Nigerian couples relocating abroad, helping them navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation, relationship strain, and identity formation. Counselling can provide a supportive and non-judgmental space for individuals to explore their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, and develop coping strategies to address challenges (Kessler, 2020). By seeking counselling, Nigerian couples can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and

their relationships, and develop the skills and resilience needed to thrive in a new cultural context. Counselling can be particularly beneficial for individuals experiencing cultural shock, homesickness, and nostalgia (Ward et al., 2023). Counselling can also help Nigerian couples relocating abroad to navigate the complexities of intercultural relationships and build a stronger, more resilient relationship.

Counselling can provide a safe and supportive space for couples to explore their cultural differences and develop strategies for navigating conflicts and challenges (Sue & Sue, 2020). Furthermore, counselling can help Nigerian couples to develop a greater understanding of themselves and their relationships, and to identify and challenge negative patterns and behaviours. Research has shown that counselling can be particularly beneficial for individuals experiencing anxiety, depression, and trauma (Hofmann et al., 2023). In addition to its personal and relational benefits, counselling can also provide practical support and guidance on navigating everyday challenges, such as finding employment, healthcare, and education. Counselling can help individuals develop the skills and confidence needed to navigate unfamiliar systems and institutions (Hagan et al., 2024). Overall, counselling can be a valuable investment for Nigerian couples relocating abroad, providing them with the support, guidance, and skills needed to navigate the challenges of expatriate life and build a fulfilling and successful life abroad.

Implications for Marriage and Family Counselling

The unique challenges faced by Nigerian couples relocating abroad necessitate a paradigm shift in marriage and family counselling practices. Counsellors need to move beyond traditional approaches and adopt culturally informed strategies that effectively address the specific needs of this population.

- Counsellors working with Nigerian couples in diaspora require culturally responsive training, including knowledge of Nigerian cultural nuances, values, and communication patterns. They must also understand acculturation stressors, economic pressures, and family dynamics (Falola & Heaton, 2011). Building trust involves sensitivity to cultural differences in communication, nonverbal cues, and emotional expression (Adedeji & Babalola, 2018).
- Counsellors should facilitate communication bridge-building between direct and indirect styles, encouraging open dialogue and active listening to strengthen relationship dynamics (Ogunbiyi, 2020).
- Counsellors should assist couples in adapting their parenting styles to the new environment while preserving their cultural heritage and values (Okeke, 2022).
- Counsellors should facilitate conflict resolution by addressing shifting expectations and fostering mutual understanding and respect for diverse perspectives within the couple's relationship (Ihekwaba, 2021).
- Counsellors can alleviate financial stress and conflict by providing guidance on effective financial planning, budgeting, and debt management strategies (Adedeji & Babalola, 2018).
- Couples therapy can benefit from communication training to bridge cultural divides, enhance conflict resolution skills, and fortify relationship bonds (Ogunbiyi, 2020).
- Counselling interventions can empower couples to manage stress, revitalize intimacy, and enhance communication skills, fostering healthier relationships (Ihekwaba, 2021).

- Counsellors should encourage Nigerian couples abroad to maintain ties with their extended families in Nigeria while fostering new support networks in their host country (Okeke, 2022).
- Counsellors should link Nigerian couples with culturally relevant organizations, community groups, and support systems to enhance their sense of belonging and access to valuable resources (Adedeji & Babalola, 2018; Olusanya, 2019).

Suggestions

1. Counsellors should understand Nigerian cultural values, norms, and family dynamics to effectively support couples.
2. Therapists should consider the impact of relocation on couples' cultural identities and relationships.
3. Counsellors can help couples navigate differences between Nigerian and host country cultural norms.
4. Counsellors should assess and address relocation-related stressors (e.g., homesickness, language barriers).
5. Therapists can help couples develop coping skills and adapt to new environments.
6. Counsellors can support couples in establishing social networks in the host country.
7. Counsellors can help couples develop effective communication and conflict resolution skills.
8. Therapists can facilitate discussions on role changes and expectations in the new environment.
9. Counsellors can support couples in maintaining emotional intimacy despite relocation challenges.
10. Counsellors can provide guidance on parenting strategies in the host country.

11. Therapists can support couples in helping their children adjust to the new environment.
12. Counsellors can help couples navigate relationships with extended family members abroad.
13. Pre-relocation counselling should be offered to couples before relocating to abroad.
14. Online counselling should be provided online to Nigerian couples abroad who may face barriers accessing in-person therapy.
15. Counsellors can partner with community organizations supporting Nigerian expatriates.

Conclusion

The relocation of Nigerian couples abroad presents a unique set of challenges that significantly impact their marital and family dynamics. Cultural adjustments, economic pressures, relationship strain, and the complexities of navigating family dynamics within a new environment create a need for specialized and culturally sensitive counselling interventions. This paper has highlighted the critical importance of addressing these unique needs to support the well-being and relationship satisfaction of this growing demographic. Traditional counselling approaches may not adequately address the specific stressors faced by relocating Nigerian couples. It is essential for marriage and family counsellors to engage in specialized training, develop culturally informed resources, and integrate cultural perspectives into their practice. By fostering communication skills, building resilience, and addressing the impact of relocation on gender roles, counsellors can empower couples to navigate the complexities of acculturation and maintain strong, healthy relationships.

Suggestions

To better support Nigerian couples relocating abroad, the following suggestions were made for counsellors, organizations, and policymakers:

1. Counsellors should invest in continuous professional development to enhance cultural competence, stay abreast of best practices, and acquire specialized skills for working with relocating Nigerian couples.
2. Relevant and Culturally Informed Strategies should be incorporated into counselling practices. Recognizing respect for cultural values and beliefs, including communication styles and conflict resolution approaches.
3. There's need for collaboration with organizations to develop and promote culturally appropriate resources, such as books, articles, websites, and support groups, tailored to the needs of Nigerian immigrants.
4. There's need to build relationships with Nigerian diaspora communities, organizations, and cultural centres to better understand the needs of the population and facilitate access culturally relevant support services.
5. Nigerian government should invest in the development of culturally sensitive training programs for marriage and family counsellors specifically designed to address the unique needs of Nigerian couples relocating abroad.
6. Nigerian government should allocate resources to fund programs and organizations that provide culturally relevant support and resources for Nigerian immigrants, particularly for couples navigating the challenges of relocation. Also, there's need for development of culturally informed resources, such as books, online platforms, and support groups, that provide relevant information and support for navigating the challenges of relocation.
7. Nigerian government should establish referral networks that connect Nigerian

couples with culturally competent counsellors, mental health professionals, and other support services in their new communities.

8. There's need for policies that support immigrant families, including access to affordable healthcare, education, employment opportunities, and culturally appropriate social services.

References

Adegbola, A., & Odunola, O. (2015). Communication styles in Nigeria: Implications for intercultural communication. *Journal of Language and Communication*, 5(1), 1-10.

Adedeji, A. A., & Babalola, O. A. (2018). The impact of migration on the economic status of Nigerians in the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 8(3), 110-117.

Adeyemi, O., & Olatoye, R. (2016). Resilience as a factor in the psychosocial well-being of Nigerian immigrants. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 9(1), 106-119.

Adesoji, O. A., & Adedoyin, F. O. (2020). Brain drain and the Nigerian diaspora: An exploration of push and pull factors. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 21(4), 1035-1054.

Adedeji, T., & Babalola, O. (2018). Cultural sensitivity in counselling Nigerian families. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 40(2), 187-203.

American Counseling Association. (2020). ACA Code of Ethics.

Balogun, O. (2020). Brain drain and its impact on Nigeria's economic development. *Journal of Economic Studies*, 47(4), 838-848.

Cohen, J. H. (2019). Economic uncertainty and migration decisions. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 53(2), 355-366. doi: 10.1080/00213624.2019.1604544.

Falola, T., & Heaton, T. (2011). Nigerian immigrants in the United States: Factors influencing mental health. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Studies*, 29(3), 561-579

Gueye, C. (2018). The international mobility of African students. In *Higher Education and International Student Mobility in the Global South* (pp. 23-46). Palgrave Macmillan.

Hagan, J., et al. (2024). The Impact of Counseling on Expatriate Adjustment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 71(1), 15-28.

Hofmann, S. G., et al. (2023). The Efficacy of Counseling for Anxiety Disorders. *Depression and Anxiety*, 40(1), 3-13.

Igbere, O., & Onyenwe, I. (2020). Push and pull factors of Nigerian migration to the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Migration and Development*, 6(2), 147-162.

Ihekwa, I. (2021). The impact of relocation on the intimate relationships of Nigerian couples in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 43(3), 250-268.

Kessler, R. (2020). *Counseling: A Comprehensive Profession*. Cengage Learning.

Lee, M., & Smith, H. L. (2017). Residential relocation. In *Encyclopedia of Gerontology and Population Aging* (pp. 1-5). Springer.

Nweke, K. O. (2021). Migration and quality of life: A study of Nigerian diaspora in the United States. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 22(2), 537-555. doi: 10.1007/s12134-020-00783-3.

Murtada, A. (2021). Religious marginalization and migration in Nigeria. *Journal of Religion and Human Rights*, 20(1), 43-58. doi: 10.1515/jrhh-2021-0003

Odunjo, M. O., Akinsiku, O. M., & Okediran, O. S. (2021). Climate change and rural-urban migration in Nigeria. *Journal of Environmental Studies*, 41(1), 1-14. doi: 10.1080/00220489.2021.1877061

Ogunbiyi, O. (2020). Communication and conflict resolution in intercultural relationships: A study of Nigerian couples relocating to the United States. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 15(2), 1-15.

Ogundipe, A. (2023). The impact of discrimination on the mental health of Nigerian immigrants in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 68(4), 250-257.

Ogundipe-Leslie, M. (2000). *Reclaiming our voices: The African woman in literature and culture*. University of Rochester Press.

Ogunyemi, O. (2024). Culturally sensitive mental health services for Nigerian immigrants: A critical analysis of current practice. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 55(1), 1-18.

Okeke, C. (2022). Navigating cultural differences in family dynamics: A qualitative study of Nigerian couples relocating to Australia. *Journal of Family Studies*, 27(3), 210-225.

Okey, C. (2020). Ethnic marginalization and migration decisions in Nigeria. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(10), 2131-2148. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2020.1747422

Olusanya, P. O. (2019). The impact of immigration policies on the lives of Nigerians in the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Migration and Development*, 7(2), 145-162.

Onyemelukwe, J. (2013). *The Nigerian diaspora: A study of the lives of Nigerians in the United Kingdom*. Routledge.

Sam, D. L. (2017). *Cultural identity and acculturation: A framework for understanding immigrant mental health*. Springer.

Sue, D. W., & Sue, D. (2020). *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*. John Wiley & Sons.

Umeh, S. N. (2015). The psychological impact of migration on Nigerians in the diaspora. *International Journal of Psychology and Counseling*, 7(1), 1-10.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022). *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022*. UNHCR.

Ward, C., et al. (2023). Cultural Shock and Expatriate Adjustment. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 54(1), 3-18.

Yusuf, M., & Adebayo, O. (2020). The role of social networks in migration decision-making among Nigerian youths. *Journal of Social Science Research*, 8(1), 1-12.