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ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN LAY COUNSELLING IN A CONGREGATIONAL SETTING: THE CASE OF THE CHURCH OF PENTECOST IN ACCRA, GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Lay counselling has become an integral component of pastoral care within Pentecostal churches in Ghana, yet the ethical dimensions of this practice remain underexplored. This study examined the ethical dilemmas faced by lay counsellors in congregational settings, the approaches they employ to resolve these dilemmas, and the resources they draw upon in ethical decision-making. Using a qualitative case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen participants comprising lay counsellors, pastors, and professional counsellors associated with the Church of Pentecost in Accra, Ghana. Thematic analysis revealed four major ethical dilemmas: confidentiality and privacy challenges, competence and training limitations, dual relationships and boundary issues, and tensions between faith and professional ethics. Counsellors employed strategies including reliance on spiritual resources, consultation and referral, confidentiality through discretion, and improvisation with available resources. Resources utilised included spiritual tools, professional and academic materials, peer and pastoral networks, and institutional training. The findings contribute to the limited empirical literature on lay counselling ethics in Ghanaian Pentecostal contexts and have implications for church policies, training programmes, and the development of ethical guidelines for congregational counselling.

Keywords: Ethical dilemmas, lay counselling, pastoral care, Pentecostal churches, Church of Pentecost, Ghana

Introduction

Counselling has become an increasingly important component of pastoral ministry within Christian congregations, particularly in Pentecostal churches where spiritual guidance, emotional care, and social support are closely integrated (Koenig, 2018; Tan, 2011). Churches have historically served as spaces where individuals seek help for personal, relational, and spiritual challenges such as marital conflicts, family disputes, grief, addiction, and psychological distress (Leavey, 2010; Doehring, 2015). As global awareness of mental health issues continues to increase, religious institutions have become important complementary sources of psychosocial support for many individuals. Tan (2011) observes that many people seek help from religious leaders before consulting professional mental health practitioners, especially in societies where religion plays a central role in community life. Similarly, Koenig (2018) notes that faith communities often provide accessible and culturally meaningful support systems for individuals experiencing emotional and psychological distress.

Within many congregational settings, counselling services are not provided exclusively by professionally trained counsellors but also by lay members who receive basic training to assist others in times of personal or spiritual difficulty. Lay counselling refers to counselling services offered by non-professional individuals who provide emotional support, spiritual guidance, and practical advice within faith-based communities (Omenyo & Atiemo, 2006; Benner, 2003). It is important to distinguish lay counselling from pastoral counselling. While pastoral counselling is typically provided by ordained ministers or clergy who have received theological training and often some counselling education, lay counselling is offered by church members who are not ordained clergy but have received varying levels of training—ranging from brief workshops to certificate programmes—to provide support to fellow congregants (Omenyo, 2011; Tan, 2011). In the context of this study, lay counsellors are defined as non-ordained church members who have been appointed or volunteer to provide counselling services within the congregational setting, often serving in roles such as deacons, deaconesses, elders, or members of church counselling committees.

These counsellors often work alongside pastors and church leaders to address issues affecting congregants, including marital challenges, family conflicts, and spiritual crises. The role of lay counsellors has become particularly important in contexts where access to professional mental health services is limited (Miller & Yamamori, 2007). In many developing countries, including Ghana, the shortage of trained mental health professionals has increased reliance on community-based counselling structures such as churches and faith-based organizations (Osei-Tutu, Affram & Oti-Boadi, 2020; Gyasi, Osei & Abass, 2018). These community-based structures often provide culturally sensitive support that resonates with the religious beliefs and values of local communities.

Pentecostal and Charismatic churches play a significant role in providing pastoral care and counselling services to their members. In Ghana, Pentecostalism has experienced significant growth and influence, shaping both religious practice and social life (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Gifford, 2004). One of the most influential Pentecostal denominations in the country is the Church of Pentecost, which has developed strong pastoral care structures that encourage members to seek guidance and counselling within the church. The Church of Pentecost operates a hierarchical structure with the General Council at the national level, territorial councils, district assemblies, and local assemblies. Counselling services are coordinated through the church's pastoral care ministry, with lay counsellors serving under the supervision of ordained pastors. Lay counsellors in such churches assist pastors in addressing the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of congregants. Pastoral counselling therefore serves as an important ministry within the church, helping individuals cope with life challenges while strengthening their spiritual well-being (Omenyo, 2011; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013).

Research on pastoral care indicates that churches often provide holistic forms of support that address spiritual, emotional, and relational dimensions of human life (Lartey, 2003; Doehring, 2015). Counselling involves dealing with highly sensitive personal information and making decisions that affect the well-being of individuals seeking help. Ethical principles such as confidentiality, competence, respect for autonomy, and

professional boundaries are therefore essential in counselling practice (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 2015; American Counseling Association, 2014). However, lay counsellors operating within church environments may not always have extensive professional training in counselling ethics, which can create situations where ethical boundaries become difficult to maintain. Studies on pastoral counselling have emphasized that ethical awareness is critical in ensuring that counselling relationships remain safe, respectful, and supportive for those seeking help (Benner, 2003; Tan, 2011).

While lay counselling has become an increasingly important feature of pastoral care in Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, significant questions remain about the ethical legitimacy, safety, and effectiveness of this practice. Several factors contribute to the problematic nature of lay counselling in congregational settings. There is ambiguity regarding the formal status and constitutional legitimacy of lay counselling within the Church of Pentecost. Although the church encourages members to seek guidance within the church, there is no clearly articulated policy or constitutional provision that formally defines the scope, limits, and accountability structures for lay counselling. This ambiguity creates uncertainty about whether lay counsellors are formally permitted to provide counselling services, what authority they have, and to whom they are accountable. The lack of formal recognition may contribute to inconsistent practices and ethical vulnerabilities. Evidence from related contexts suggests that lay counselling, when provided without adequate training and supervision, can lead to negative outcomes. Studies have documented cases where untrained counsellors have caused harm through inappropriate interventions, failure to recognise serious mental health conditions, or violation of confidentiality (Agyarko-Baidoo, 2019; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). In the Ghanaian context, there are anecdotal reports of cases where lay counsellors' spiritual interventions (such as deliverance prayers for mental illness) have delayed access to necessary medical treatment, with potentially harmful consequences. While systematic documentation is limited, these cases underscore the risks associated with unregulated lay counselling.

The absence of formal ethical guidelines, supervision structures, and accountability mechanisms for lay counsellors creates significant risks for both counsellors and counselees. Without clear ethical frameworks, lay counsellors may inadvertently violate confidentiality, engage in dual relationships that compromise their objectivity, or provide advice that exceeds their competence. The communal nature of Ghanaian society, where personal issues are often considered collective concerns, further complicates ethical practice, as counsellors may face pressure from church leaders and community members to disclose confidential information (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020; Gyasi et al., 2018).

Despite the growing importance of lay counselling within Pentecostal churches, there remains limited empirical research on the ethical dilemmas faced by lay counsellors in Ghanaian congregational settings. Much of the existing literature on counselling ethics focuses primarily on professionally trained counsellors, leaving a significant gap in understanding how lay counsellors navigate ethical challenges in faith-based counselling environments (Doehring, 2015; Lartey, 2003). This gap in knowledge presents an important problem for pastoral counselling practice within congregational settings, as it hinders the development of appropriate ethical guidelines and support systems.

A. Objectives

This study was guided by three main objectives:

1. To examine the ethical dilemmas faced by lay counsellors in Pentecostal churches.
2. To explore the approaches employed by lay counsellors to resolve ethical dilemmas encountered during counselling.
3. To identify the resources used or referred to by lay counsellors in handling ethical dilemmas within congregational counselling contexts.

Literature review

The Nature and Scope of Lay Counselling

Lay counselling has been defined as the provision of emotional support, spiritual guidance, and practical advice by non-professionally trained individuals within faith communities (Omenyo & Atiemo, 2006; Benner, 2003). It differs from professional counselling in several key respects: it is typically provided by volunteers or church appointees who may have limited formal training; it is embedded within the spiritual and social fabric of the church community; and it integrates spiritual practices such as prayer and scripture reading with supportive conversations (Tan, 2011). The role of lay counsellors in Ghanaian churches has historical roots in the communal traditions of African societies, where elders, community leaders, and religious figures have long provided guidance and support to individuals facing personal challenges (Lartey, 2003; Omenyo, 2011). In contemporary Ghana, the expansion of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches has created new opportunities and demands for lay counselling. As churches have grown in size and influence, the pastoral care needs of members have become more diverse and complex, requiring more structured approaches to counselling (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Gifford, 2004).

Research on lay counselling in Ghana suggests that counsellors typically receive training through church-based programmes, workshops, or seminars, which vary significantly in duration and quality (Agyarko-Baidoo, 2019). Some churches have established formal counselling ministries with designated lay counsellors who receive ongoing training and supervision, while others rely on informal arrangements where any willing member may provide counsel to others. The Church of Pentecost has developed a more structured approach, with the church's pastoral care ministry providing training and oversight for lay counsellors, though the extent and consistency of this training varies across districts and assemblies.

Ethical Dilemmas in Counselling

Ethical dilemmas in counselling have been extensively documented in the professional literature (Corey et al., 2015; Kitchener, 1984). Kitchener (1984) identified five fundamental ethical principles that guide counselling practice: autonomy (respecting clients' right to self-determination), beneficence (promoting clients' well-being), nonmaleficence (avoiding harm), justice (treating clients fairly), and fidelity (keeping promises and maintaining trust). Ethical dilemmas arise when these principles conflict, requiring counsellors to make difficult decisions about which principle to prioritise. In professional counselling contexts, common ethical dilemmas include conflicts between confidentiality and the duty to protect (e.g., when a client poses a danger to self or others), dual relationships that compromise objectivity, boundary crossings that may lead to exploitation, and issues of competence when counsellors lack the necessary skills to address clients' needs (Corey et al., 2015; American Counseling Association, 2014). Research has identified several factors that contribute to ethical dilemmas, including inadequate training, lack of supervision, organisational pressures, and cultural factors that complicate ethical decision-making (Doehring, 2015; Tan, 2011).

Ethical Challenges in Pastoral and Lay Counselling

Research on pastoral counselling ethics has identified several distinctive challenges that arise in faith-based counselling contexts. Confidentiality is a recurring concern, as pastoral counsellors may face pressure to share information with church leaders or community members, or may lack private spaces for conducting counselling sessions (Benner, 2003; Haug, 1999). In Ghanaian contexts, the communal nature of society and the hierarchical structure of churches can create particular pressures to disclose information (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020; Gyasi et al., 2018).

Dual relationships are another significant challenge in congregational counselling. Because counsellors often serve multiple roles within the church community as counsellors, spiritual mentors, friends, and ministry leaders they may struggle to maintain appropriate boundaries (Haug, 1999; Corey et al., 2015). These overlapping roles can create conflicts of interest and make it difficult to provide objective counsel, particularly in cases involving marital disputes or conflicts between church members. Competence limitations are

frequently cited as a concern in pastoral and lay counselling. Many lay counsellors have limited training and may lack the knowledge and skills to address complex psychological issues such as trauma, depression, or suicidal ideation (Tan, 2011; Doehring, 2015). This raises concerns about the quality and safety of counselling services provided by lay counsellors, as well as the potential for harm when counsellors exceed their competence. The tension between faith and professional ethics is a distinctive feature of pastoral counselling. While spiritual practices such as prayer and scripture reading are integral to pastoral care, they may conflict with professional ethical standards, particularly when clients require psychological interventions rather than spiritual support (Tan, 2011; Doehring, 2015). Lay counsellors in Pentecostal churches may face particular pressure to prioritise spiritual interventions, given the theological emphasis on spiritual authority and divine healing.

Theoretical Perspectives on Ethical Decision-Making

Rest's Four-Component Model (1986) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding ethical decision-making in counselling. The model identifies four psychological processes involved in ethical behaviour: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. Research has applied this model to counselling contexts, finding that counsellors' ethical decision-making is influenced by their ability to recognise ethical issues, their knowledge of ethical principles, their commitment to ethical values, and their confidence in implementing ethical decisions (Kitchener, 1984; Corey et al., 2015). Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) offers a complementary perspective on how counsellors develop ethical frameworks and behaviours. According to this theory, ethical behaviour is learned through observation of role models (such as pastors and senior counsellors), personal experiences, and reinforcement from the organisational environment. Self-efficacy the belief in one's ability to handle ethical challenges plays a crucial role in motivating ethical behaviour (Bandura, 1986). In the context of lay counselling, Social Cognitive Theory helps explain why counsellors may model their ethical practices on those of senior church leaders, and why limited training and supervision may undermine their self-efficacy in handling complex ethical dilemmas.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are suitable for exploring complex social phenomena because they allow researchers to gain rich, contextualised insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices (Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A case study approach was adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of lay counselling practices within the specific congregational and cultural context of Pentecostal churches (Yin, 2018). The case study approach was particularly appropriate for this research because it enabled a focused examination of the ethical dilemmas experienced by lay counsellors within the bounded system of the Church of Pentecost in Accra, while also allowing for exploration of how these dilemmas are shaped by the broader Pentecostal and Ghanaian cultural contexts.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were knowledgeable and actively involved in counselling. Three categories of participants were included:

1. **Lay counsellors:** Non-ordained church members who provide counselling services within the congregational setting. In the context of the Church of Pentecost, these included deacons, deaconesses, elders, and members of church counselling committees who had received some training in counselling through church programmes.
2. **Pastors:** Ordained ministers who supervise lay counsellors and provide pastoral counselling themselves. Pastors provided insights into the organisational and hierarchical dynamics that shape ethical decision-making.

3. **Professional counsellors:** Individuals with formal professional qualifications in counselling or psychology who also provide services within church contexts or have experience with church-based referrals. Professional counsellors provided perspectives on professional ethical standards and the gaps in lay counselling practice.

This ensured that the data reflected a range of experiences across age, gender, professional training, and church roles (Patton, 2015). The sample comprised fifteen participants aged 35–62 years, representing mid- to senior-level counsellors with varying levels of professional and church-based training, including individuals with certificates, diplomas, master's, and doctoral degrees in counselling, theology, or related fields. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where data collection continued until no new themes emerged from participant accounts (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to describe their experiences of ethical dilemmas, the strategies they used to resolve them, and the resources they relied upon (Kvale, 2009). This method allowed the researcher to probe for further clarification and to capture participants' subjective perspectives in their own words, which is particularly important when exploring sensitive ethical issues (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). The interviews were conducted in private settings, including church offices, mission houses, and quiet meeting rooms, to ensure confidentiality and promote candid responses. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives, theoretical frameworks, and existing literature on counselling ethics. The guide included questions on participants' counselling practices, ethical dilemmas encountered, strategies for resolving dilemmas, resources utilised, and perspectives on ethical training and support.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, following the systematic process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis proceeded through six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

To enhance analytical rigor, the following strategies were employed:

1. **Triangulation:** Findings were validated through triangulation across participants from different categories (lay counsellors, pastors, professional counsellors) and by cross-checking with existing literature on counselling ethics (Creswell, 2018).
2. **Member checking:** Preliminary findings were shared with some participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations.
3. **Peer debriefing:** Regular discussions with colleagues and supervisors were held to challenge assumptions and refine interpretations.
4. **Reflexivity:** The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document personal assumptions, biases, and decisions made throughout the research process, thereby enhancing transparency and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of the information they shared (American Counseling Association, 2014; Creswell, 2018). Pseudonyms and participant codes were used to protect participants' identities, and sensitive data were securely stored.

Participants were also informed about the potential risks and benefits of participation, and were provided with contact information for professional support services if needed.

Results

Demographic Information of Participants

The participants in this study were drawn from diverse denominational, professional, and educational backgrounds, reflecting the broad spectrum of counselling practices within Ghanaian churches. Their ages ranged from 35 to 62 years, with the majority falling between 40 and 55 years, representing mid-career counsellors who combine pastoral responsibilities with counselling practice. Both male and female counsellors were included, although men dominated the sample (12 male, 3 female), consistent with the male-centred leadership structures of most Ghanaian congregations. The female counsellors, though fewer, were highly qualified, with advanced degrees and extensive years of practice, including one professional counsellor with 27 years of experience (P03).

Several participants held doctoral degrees in fields such as Clinical Psychology, Religious Studies, and Ministry, while others possessed master's degrees in counselling, theology, or related disciplines. A number of counsellors had certificates or diplomas in pastoral counselling, and some had academic backgrounds outside counselling, such as biochemistry, nuclear engineering, and human resource management, but supplemented these with church-based training programmes. Professional counsellors registered with the Ghana Psychology Association were also represented, alongside lay counsellors trained through church seminars and workshops.

Counselling experience among participants ranged from five years to over 27 years. Senior counsellors with more than 15 years of practice relied heavily on experiential wisdom and professional training, while mid-level counsellors combined church-based training with limited professional exposure. Junior counsellors, with five to eight years of practice, were often still pursuing formal qualifications. While participants were drawn from the Church of Pentecost for the primary case study, some counsellors had affiliations with other denominations, including the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Methodist Church Ghana, the Church of Christ, Catholic institutions, and Evangelical ministries. This ecumenical spread reflects the mobility of counsellors across denominations and the broader context of lay counselling in Ghana. Counselling was conducted in church auditoriums, mission houses, hospitals, schools, universities, and public service offices.

Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Lay Counsellors

The first objective sought to investigate the ethical dilemmas faced by lay counsellors in Pentecostal churches. Analysis of responses from counsellors revealed four major interrelated dilemmas: confidentiality and privacy challenges, competence and training limitations, dual relationships and boundary issues, and faith versus professional ethics tensions.

Confidentiality and Privacy Challenges

Many counsellors described confidentiality as one of the most pressing ethical dilemmas. Counselling often takes place in church auditoriums or mission houses, which lack privacy and expose counselees to interruptions. One counsellor lamented:

"We use the mission house or sometimes the church auditorium. People walk in during sessions, and it becomes difficult to keep matters private." (P04)

Others explained how church leadership sometimes demanded access to counselling information:

"Pastors ask for updates about cases, but I feel torn between respecting confidentiality and obeying my leaders. Sometimes the elders expect me to share details of counselling sessions during meetings. I feel it violates confidentiality, but refusing makes me look disobedient." (P11)

This dilemma reflects the tension between professional ethical standards, which emphasise confidentiality as a core principle, and the hierarchical structure of the church, which may require accountability and reporting. The lack of private counselling spaces compounds this dilemma, as counsellors struggle to maintain

confidentiality in environments where privacy is not guaranteed. From a theoretical perspective, this represents a conflict between fidelity (keeping promises of confidentiality) and beneficence (maintaining good relationships with church leadership) within Rest's model, with counsellors demonstrating moral sensitivity in recognising the dilemma but struggling with moral judgment and character in resolving it.

Competence and Training Limitations

Participants also expressed dilemmas around competence, especially when faced with complex psychological cases. Many counsellors had only church-based training and struggled with issues such as trauma, depression, or suicidal ideation. One counsellor explained:

"I studied counselling in theology, but when I meet cases of mental illness, I feel unprepared. When a member came with suicidal thoughts, I prayed with him but felt guilty because I knew I lacked the skills to handle such a case." (P12)

Another added:

"I am still pursuing professional counselling studies, but already I face cases that require psychologists." (P09)

This dilemma reflects the gap between the scope of counselling practice and the competence of lay counsellors. According to the American Counseling Association (2014) Code of Ethics, counsellors should practice only within their boundaries of competence. However, in the congregational context, lay counsellors may feel obligated to provide help even when they lack the necessary skills, particularly when professional mental health services are not readily accessible. This dilemma also relates to Social Cognitive Theory, as counsellors with low self-efficacy regarding complex cases may still feel pressured to intervene due to environmental expectations and lack of available alternatives.

Dual Relationships and Boundary Issues

Counsellors reported challenges in maintaining boundaries, especially when counselling congregants they knew personally. One marriage counsellor shared:

"I counsel couples I worship with every Sunday. It is difficult to remain neutral when I know both of them well. Because I am also their pastor, some members expect me to take sides in disputes. It is hard to remain impartial." (P08)

Gender dynamics also created dilemmas:

"Female clients feel uneasy discussing sexual matters with me as a male pastor. Sometimes I sense they are holding back." (P10)

This dilemma reflects the multiple roles that lay counsellors occupy within the church community. As members of the congregation, they have personal relationships with counselees that extend beyond the counselling relationship. These overlapping roles can compromise objectivity and create conflicts of interest. Rest's model helps explain this dilemma as a conflict between fidelity (maintaining boundaries) and beneficence (responding to community expectations). The communal nature of Ghanaian society exacerbates this dilemma, as personal issues are often considered collective concerns involving the wider church community (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020).

Faith versus Professional Ethics Tensions

A recurring dilemma was the tension between spiritual expectations and professional counselling ethics. Counsellors explained that congregants often expected prayer, prophecy, or deliverance, even when issues required psychological intervention. One counsellor noted:

"Members expect me to pray and prophesy, but sometimes the issue clearly needs therapy. If I suggest referral to a psychologist, some members think I lack faith. It makes me hesitate." (P02)

Another counsellor shared:

"Some clients reject professional advice if it does not align with scripture. I struggle to balance biblical teaching with counselling ethics." (P13)

This dilemma reflects the intersection of Pentecostal theology, which emphasises spiritual authority and divine healing, and professional counselling ethics, which emphasise evidence-based interventions and client autonomy. The tension is particularly acute in Pentecostal contexts where spiritual practices such as prayer, prophecy, and deliverance are central to the faith tradition. Rest's model illuminates this as a conflict between moral sensitivity (recognising the need for professional intervention) and moral motivation (prioritising professional ethics over spiritual expectations), with environmental pressures from congregants reinforcing spiritual approaches.

Approaches Employed to Resolve Ethical Dilemmas

The second objective sought to investigate the approaches lay counsellors in Pentecostal churches employ to resolve ethical dilemmas. Analysis of responses revealed four major strategies: reliance on spiritual resources, consultation and referral, confidentiality through discretion, and improvisation with available resources.

Reliance on Spiritual Resources

Many counsellors explained that prayer, scripture, and reliance on the Holy Spirit were their primary tools in resolving ethical dilemmas.

"When I face difficult cases, I pray with the client and ask the Holy Spirit to guide me. Sometimes I use scripture to encourage counselees, especially when they feel hopeless. It helps me avoid making decisions that may go against my faith." (P06)

Another counsellor indicated:

"I believe fasting and prayer before counselling sessions give me wisdom to handle dilemmas. Quoting biblical passages reassures clients that the advice is not just mine but God's word." (P13)

This strategy reflects the integration of spiritual practices with counselling, consistent with Pentecostal theology (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013). From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, this approach is modelled on the practices of pastors and senior church leaders, who often use spiritual interventions as primary tools. The reliance on spiritual resources also serves to enhance counsellors' self-efficacy, as they believe divine guidance compensates for their limited training. However, from Rest's perspective, this strategy may bypass the moral judgment component of ethical decision-making, as counsellors may rely on spiritual guidance rather than systematically evaluating ethical alternatives.

Consultation and Referral

Counsellors also reported consulting senior pastors, peers, or professionals when dilemmas exceeded their competence. Referral was seen as a way to protect clients while maintaining pastoral responsibility.

"If I realise the issue is beyond me, I refer the person to a psychologist or a senior pastor. I sometimes discuss cases with colleagues to get advice, but I make sure not to mention names to protect confidentiality." (P10)

"When I am unsure, I seek guidance from the district pastor. His experience helps me decide. I have a friend who is a professional counsellor; I call him for advice when I feel stuck." (P13)

This strategy demonstrates moral sensitivity in recognising limitations and moral motivation in prioritising client welfare. However, the informal nature of consultation in this context contrasts with professional counselling settings, where supervision is typically formal and structured (Corey et al., 2015). This approach reflects the application of the moral judgment component of Rest's model, as counsellors seek external input to evaluate alternative courses of action.

Confidentiality through Discretion

Counsellors described using discretion to balance confidentiality with church leadership expectations. They often shared general information without revealing sensitive details.

"When elders ask about cases, I give general updates without mentioning names or personal details. I try to keep records private. If I must report, I only share what is necessary. Sometimes I summarise issues in a way that protects the client's identity but still informs leadership. I avoid discussing counselling matters in public spaces, even when pressured by other members." (P10)

This strategy reflects counsellors' attempts to balance competing obligations: maintaining confidentiality (fidelity) while being accountable to church leadership (beneficence). It demonstrates moral character in implementing ethical decisions despite pressure from leadership. However, the informal and unregulated nature of this practice raises concerns about consistency and the potential for breaches of confidentiality. From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, this approach is learned through experience and observation of how senior counsellors navigate similar pressures.

Improvisation with Available Resources

Given limited facilities and training, counsellors often improvised solutions to ethical dilemmas. They adapted counselling spaces, used personal judgment, or relied on informal guidelines.

"Since we don't have proper counselling rooms, I schedule sessions at quiet times to reduce interruptions. I rely on my experience and the little training I have. Sometimes I just do what feels right for the client. I use my office at home when privacy is needed, because the church has no counselling room. We sometimes borrow small meeting spaces to ensure confidentiality during sessions." (P14)

This strategy reflects the resource constraints in congregational counselling and counsellors' resilience in adapting to challenging circumstances. However, improvisation raises concerns about consistency and ethical standards, as different counsellors may use different approaches without clear guidelines. Rest's model illuminates this as counsellors demonstrating moral character and resourcefulness despite limited resources, but the lack of formal guidance undermines the moral judgment component of ethical decision-making.

Resources Used or Referred to in Handling Ethical Dilemmas

The third objective sought to explore the resources lay counsellors in Pentecostal churches use or refer to when handling ethical dilemmas. Analysis of responses revealed two major categories of resources: spiritual resources and institutional and organisational resources.

Spiritual Resources

Counsellors consistently emphasised the centrality of spiritual tools such as prayer, scripture, fasting, and reliance on the Holy Spirit. These resources were seen as both guiding principles and practical interventions.

"Prayer is my first resource. Before counselling, I pray with the client and ask God for wisdom. The Holy Spirit guides me when I am confused. I rely on His inspiration more than anything else." (P05)

"I use the Bible as my counselling manual. Scriptures provide direction when dilemmas arise. Quoting biblical passages reassures clients that the advice is not mine alone but God's word." (P13)

"Sometimes I fast before difficult sessions. It helps me feel spiritually prepared." (P12)

"I use the Ghana Psychology Association guidelines when I am unsure about ethical boundaries. My counselling certificate came with a manual, and I still consult it when dilemmas arise." (P08)

"I rely on textbooks from my counselling studies. They remind me of professional standards. During my PhD, I learned about confidentiality and competence. I apply those principles in church counselling." (P14)

"I sometimes check online resources on counselling ethics to guide my practice." (P10)

Spiritual resources were the most frequently cited, reflecting the theological foundation of Pentecostal counselling (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013). From a theoretical perspective, spiritual resources serve multiple functions: they enhance moral sensitivity by providing frameworks for identifying ethical issues (Rest, 1986); they shape moral judgment by providing scriptural guidance; and they support moral character by providing spiritual strength to implement ethical decisions. However, Doehring (2015) cautions that over-reliance on spiritual resources can neglect professional ethical standards, potentially creating a gap in moral judgment when spiritual guidance conflicts with professional ethics.

Institutional and Organizational Resources

Counsellors also referred to resources provided by their churches or institutions, such as training workshops, counselling courses, and organisational guidelines.

"The church organised a two-year counselling course. We attend workshops organised by the church. They give us tools to handle dilemmas." (P10)

"My church has a counselling committee. We sometimes meet to discuss ethical issues." (P11)

"I rely on the counselling desk at the hospital where I also practice. It provides professional support." (P03)

These institutional resources provide structured support for lay counsellors, though their availability and quality vary across churches. The Church of Pentecost's counselling committee structure provides some oversight, but as participants indicated, such committees are not uniformly active across all assemblies. This variability reflects the decentralised nature of church governance and the inconsistency in implementing national-level policies at local levels. From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, these resources shape the environmental factors that influence counsellors' ethical behaviour, providing models, guidelines, and reinforcement for ethical practice.

Discussion

Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Lay Counsellors

The findings revealed that counsellors grapple with dilemmas around confidentiality, competence, dual relationships, and faith versus professional ethics. These challenges are consistent with broader counselling literature but also reflect unique contextual factors specific to the Ghanaian Pentecostal setting.

Confidentiality and Privacy Challenges

Confidentiality breaches due to inadequate facilities echo Corey, Corey, and Callanan's (2015) assertion that counselling ethics are often compromised when physical environments do not support privacy. In Ghanaian Pentecostal contexts, the communal nature of church life intensifies this challenge, as leaders sometimes demand access to counselling information. This finding extends existing literature by demonstrating how cultural expectations of communal accountability intersect with professional ethical standards in ways that create unique tensions for lay counsellors. Unlike professional counselling settings where confidentiality is protected by legal and institutional frameworks, the congregational context presents informal pressures to disclose information that may not be adequately addressed by existing ethical guidelines.

This finding also illustrates Rest's (1986) model in practice: counsellors demonstrate moral sensitivity by recognising confidentiality as an ethical issue, but experience difficulty with moral judgment (determining when and how much to disclose to leaders) and moral character (resisting pressure to disclose). The lack of clear church policies on confidentiality contributes to this difficulty, as counsellors must rely on their own judgment without formal guidance.

Competence and Training Limitations

Competence dilemmas, where counsellors face cases beyond their training, align with the American Counseling Association (2014) Code of Ethics, which emphasises practising within one's boundaries of competence. Similar findings were reported by Agyarko-Baidoo (2019), who noted that many lay counsellors in Ghana rely on short-term church training rather than professional qualifications, creating risks of harm. This study contributes additional nuance by revealing that competence dilemmas are not merely a matter of inadequate training but are exacerbated by congregants' high expectations of spiritual intervention, which may discourage counsellors from acknowledging their limitations and referring cases appropriately.

From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, this finding reflects the interaction of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. Counsellors' personal factors (limited training and low self-efficacy for complex cases) interact with environmental factors (congregational expectations, limited professional support) to produce behavioural outcomes (continuing to counsel despite limitations). The tension between acknowledging limitations and meeting congregational expectations creates a dilemma that is distinctively Pentecostal, as counsellors may feel that referring to professional psychologists reflects spiritual weakness.

Dual Relationships and Boundary Issues

Dual relationships and boundary issues are well-documented in pastoral counselling literature. Haug (1999) argues that counselling within congregations inherently involves overlapping roles, which can compromise neutrality. In this study, counsellors admitted difficulty counselling congregants they knew personally, especially in marital disputes. Gender dynamics further complicated boundaries, echoing Oduro (2018), who found that female counselees often feel uncomfortable discussing intimate issues with male pastors. This study extends these findings by demonstrating that boundary issues in Pentecostal churches are not merely individual ethical lapses but are embedded in the social structure of the church, where multiple roles are expected and valued.

The communal nature of Ghanaian society (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020) intensifies boundary challenges, as personal issues are often considered collective concerns involving the wider church community. This cultural context creates expectations that counsellors will share information with leaders and community members, making it difficult to maintain professional boundaries. Rest's model helps explain why counsellors struggle with moral judgment in this area: they must weigh competing obligations to confidentiality (fidelity), community relationships (beneficence), and organisational accountability (justice), with no clear guidance on how to prioritise these competing values.

Faith versus Professional Ethics Tensions

The tension between faith and professional ethics reflects Pentecostal theology's emphasis on spiritual authority. As Doebling (2015) explains, pastoral counsellors often struggle to integrate spiritual practices with professional standards. Counsellors reported pressure to prioritise prayer and prophecy, even when psychological interventions were needed. This confirms literature on the hybrid nature of pastoral counselling, where spiritual and professional ethics intersect and sometimes conflict (Doebling, 2015; Tan, 2011). This study contributes to understanding how this tension is navigated in practice, revealing that counsellors often feel caught between congregational expectations and professional standards.

This finding also illustrates the application of Rest's model in a culturally specific context. Moral sensitivity requires recognising when professional intervention is needed; moral judgment requires evaluating whether professional ethics or spiritual expectations should take priority; moral motivation requires prioritising client welfare despite spiritual pressure; and moral character requires the courage to implement professional interventions despite congregational criticism. The tension is particularly acute in Pentecostal contexts where spiritual authority is highly valued and professional psychology may be viewed with suspicion (Oppong Asante, 2016).

Approaches Employed to Resolve Ethical Dilemmas

Reliance on Spiritual Resources

The reliance on prayer, scripture, and fasting reflects Pentecostal spirituality, where divine guidance is central to decision-making. This finding resonates with Asamoah-Gyadu (2013), who highlights the role of pneumatology (Holy Spirit guidance) in Pentecostal counselling. While spiritually empowering, this reliance can overshadow professional ethical standards, raising questions about balance. This study suggests that the theological framework of Pentecostalism, while providing meaningful resources for ethical reflection, may also create tensions when professional standards are perceived as contradicting spiritual guidance. From a theoretical perspective, this approach demonstrates how counsellors integrate their faith with ethical decision-making. Social Cognitive Theory illuminates how this approach is learned through observation of pastors and senior counsellors who model spiritual reliance. Rest's model reveals a potential limitation: while spiritual resources may enhance moral sensitivity (helping counsellors recognise the spiritual dimensions of dilemmas) and moral character (providing strength to implement decisions), they may undermine moral judgment if counsellors rely on spiritual guidance rather than systematically evaluating alternatives.

Consultation and Referral

Counsellors sought advice from peers, senior pastors, or professional psychologists. This aligns with Corey et al. (2015), who emphasise supervision and consultation as safeguards against ethical lapses. However,

cultural resistance to referral, noted by participants, mirrors findings by Oppong Asante (2016), who observed that Ghanaian congregants often mistrust "secular" psychology, preferring spiritual solutions. This study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to referral that integrate spiritual and professional perspectives. The consultation approach reflects the application of the moral judgment component of Rest's model, as counsellors seek external input to evaluate alternatives. However, the informal nature of consultation in this context as opposed to formal supervision in professional settings raises concerns about consistency and quality. From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, the absence of structured supervision limits counsellors' opportunities for learning through observation and feedback, potentially undermining their self-efficacy in handling complex dilemmas.

Confidentiality through Discretion

Confidentiality through discretion sharing general updates without revealing sensitive details reflects counsellors' attempts to balance privacy with hierarchical accountability. This practice is consistent with the American Counseling Association (2014) guidelines on limited disclosure, but in Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, discretion is often informal and unregulated. This study reveals that counsellors develop adaptive strategies to navigate organisational pressures while maintaining ethical standards, but these strategies may be inconsistent across contexts. This finding illustrates the moral character component of Rest's model, as counsellors demonstrate persistence and courage in implementing confidentiality despite pressure from leadership. However, the lack of formal policies on disclosure means that counsellors must rely on their own judgment, potentially leading to inconsistency across counsellors and contexts. This underscores the need for clear guidelines that specify appropriate disclosure practices.

Improvisation with Available Resources

Improvisation with available resources highlights the resource constraints in congregational counselling. Counsellors adapted spaces, relied on intuition, or used informal guidelines. This finding echoes Agyarko-Baidoo (2019), who noted that many Ghanaian churches lack dedicated counselling facilities, forcing counsellors to improvise. While practical, improvisation risks inconsistency and ethical compromise. This study suggests that the lack of formal resources may contribute to ethical vulnerabilities that could be addressed through improved infrastructure and training. From a theoretical perspective, improvisation reflects counsellors' resilience in navigating environmental constraints. Social Cognitive Theory illuminates how counsellors adapt their behaviour to their environment, developing strategies to maintain ethical practice despite limited resources. However, Rest's model highlights the risks of improvisation: without formal guidance, counsellors may make decisions based on intuition rather than systematic ethical reasoning, potentially compromising moral judgment.

Resources Used in Handling Ethical Dilemmas

Spiritual Resources

Spiritual resources were the most frequently cited, with counsellors relying on prayer, scripture, fasting, and the Holy Spirit. This finding is consistent with Asamoah-Gyadu (2013), who argues that Pentecostal counselling is inseparable from spiritual practices. While spiritually meaningful, Doehring (2015) cautions that over-reliance on spiritual resources can neglect professional ethical standards. This study reveals a paradox: the same spiritual resources that provide ethical guidance and legitimacy for counsellors may also limit engagement with professional ethics.

This finding has important theoretical implications. It suggests that the interaction between personal factors (faith traditions), environmental factors (church culture), and behavioural factors (counselling practices) in Social Cognitive Theory creates a self-reinforcing cycle where spiritual resources are prioritised over professional resources. Rest's model illuminates how this reliance shapes moral reasoning, as counsellors may use spiritual guidance as a substitute for systematic ethical analysis rather than as a complement to professional reasoning.

Professional and Academic Resources

Professional and academic resources, such as counselling manuals and ethical codes, were used by counsellors with formal training. This reflects the importance of professionalization in counselling, as emphasised by the Ghana Psychology Association (2018). However, the limited number of counsellors with access to such resources highlights the gap between professional and lay practice. This aligns with Corey et al. (2015), who stress the importance of supervision and peer support in ethical decision-making. Yet, in Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, consultation is often informal, lacking structured supervision.

The limited use of professional resources reflects the environmental factors in Social Cognitive Theory: counsellors who work primarily within church settings may have limited exposure to professional resources and may not see them as relevant to their practice. This highlights the need for greater integration of professional resources into lay counselling training and practice.

Institutional Resources

Institutional resources, such as church-organised training courses and workshops, supplemented counsellors' practice. This finding resonates with Oduro (2018), who noted that churches in Ghana increasingly provide training for lay counsellors, though these programmes vary in quality. This study suggests that institutional resources are valuable but inconsistent, and that more standardised approaches to training and support are needed.

From a theoretical perspective, institutional resources represent the organisational or environmental factors in Social Cognitive Theory. The Church of Pentecost's counselling committee structure provides some institutional support, but the variability across assemblies suggests that implementation is inconsistent. Rest's model underscores the importance of institutional resources for all four components of ethical decision-making: training enhances moral sensitivity and judgment, supervision supports moral character, and organisational culture influences moral motivation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined the ethical dilemmas faced by lay counsellors in Pentecostal congregational settings, focusing on the Church of Pentecost in Accra, Ghana. The findings reveal four major ethical dilemmas: confidentiality and privacy challenges, competence and training limitations, dual relationships and boundary issues, and tensions between faith and professional ethics. These dilemmas are shaped by the congregational context, where counselling occurs in shared spaces, under hierarchical leadership, and within a culture that prioritises spiritual authority. Counsellors employ a range of strategies to navigate these dilemmas, including reliance on spiritual resources, consultation and referral, confidentiality through discretion, and improvisation with available resources. While these approaches demonstrate resilience and creativity, they also reveal gaps in formal ethical infrastructure. Spiritual reliance provides comfort and legitimacy within Pentecostal theology but risks overshadowing professional standards. Consultation and referral are valuable yet often hindered by cultural resistance. Discretion and improvisation reflect counsellors' attempts to adapt but lack consistency and formal regulation.

The resources counsellors draw upon include spiritual tools (prayer, scripture, fasting), professional and academic materials, peer and pastoral networks, institutional training, and personal experience and discretion. Spiritual resources dominate, underscoring the theological foundation of Pentecostal counselling. Professional and academic resources are used by counsellors with formal training but remain limited in availability. Institutional resources vary across churches, and personal experience fills gaps where formal resources are absent but risks inconsistency.

It is, therefore, recommended that lay counsellors in congregational settings should undergo regular training on ethics and counselling competences to enable them to navigate the numerous ethical dilemmas they face in their counselling work.

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