A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH IN DEVELOPING A CYBERCOUNSELING PROGRAM

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Abstract

Recent developments point to the emergence of a new era. In a state of what is labeled as the Information Age, the world is opening up to a new order that is increasingly becoming "mobile, global and highly dependent on technology." The influence of Information technology (IT) encompasses all levels of society: from government institutions, to industries, hospitals, schools, and the homes. It has changed the way man works, thinks, and relates. In the "eye" of all these rapid sociotechnological changes are today's generation, the Generation Y. Growing up side by side the evolution of information technology, the millennial generation expectedly settled in like it is the most natural thing to do. Born between 1979 and 1994, today's young are technologically proficient and are characterized as the most informed generation.

Cybercounseling, a form of human interaction, is an obvious outgrowth of the times. Moving away from the established counseling modus operandi of face-to-face (f2f) interaction, it has developed strategies and practices which are distinctly its own. Considering that universities and colleges are now catering to the techno-savvy Generation Y, a new counseling framework may be in order.

Drawing from the Grounded Theory approach, this study looked into the state of the Cybercounseling practice as contextualized in the Philippines where IT takes a different expression altogether. Participants of the study included practicing counselors, IT/network administrators, as well as counselor educators and researchers from 27 participating online colleges and universities in Metro Manila. Four
strategies were employed, namely the survey, the Delphi technique, the interviews with key informants and the literature analysis. Data from these strategies were analyzed using the Grounded Theory procedure of open, axial and selective coding. Analyses were pooled together to develop a framework for Cybercounseling practice in the Philippines.

The analyzed data revealed that the professional practice of counseling in cyberspace is possible, is flourishing, and, based on anecdotal evidences, is proving helpful to certain types of clients. In the Philippines where the practice is described to be “still in its infancy”, it is bound to thrive in colleges and universities for three reasons: 1) professional counselors are found in such institutions; 2) state-of-the art information technology is available; and 3) the academe is the seat of the technologically-literate/savvy Generation Y. While concerns for confidentiality, lack of personal touch/impersonality, and inadequate IT infrastructure echoed among counselors in participating universities, the network administrators and the extant literature proved otherwise. Cybercounseling in Philippine universities can take two forms: general information (for non-secured sites) and online counseling (for secured sites). Procedures for each of these forms culled mainly from extant literature and from experiences of cybercounselors were highlighted. Major considerations in running a Cybercounseling service include keeping the information current and relevant to the target audience, securing all transactions, and ensuring a wider student access to such service. Failure to deal with aforementioned considerations defeats the purpose of Cybercounseling.

On the technical side, it is imperative to factor in infrastructure limitations.
Despite claims that the school’s Information Technology unit does provide for the IT needs of the various departments and units in the university, the GCC appears to be one among programs which are not always the unit’s top priority. Among the participant HEIs, only 3 institutions have a 1:1 Counselor-Internet-connected Personal Computer ratio.

In the end, it is acknowledged that not all counselors may engage in Cybercounseling practice. However it is likewise recognized that it is an obligation for practitioners to possess an awareness of the processes, methodologies, ethical, and legal considerations of Cybercounseling as more and more of the Generation Y are entering colleges and universities. More and more of the Generation Y too, are accessing the Internet. In the interest of the clients, the counselors and the profession, a question is aptly posed: If the professional counselor is not online, who is?