

# Lived Experiences of Counselors on Online Counseling

Paul John G. Flores, Teresita T. Rungduin

College of Advanced Studies, Philippine Normal University, Manila, Philippines

Email: pauljohnflores16@gmail.com

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## Abstract

How do mental health professionals thrive in their practice of counseling during the pandemic? The study explored the lived experiences of counselors in conducting online counseling and the emerging practices and processes applied to their conduct of the services. Using the phenomenological research design, the narratives of seven counseling practitioners who are conducting online counseling for at least three months and working in a tertiary institution in Metro Manila were examined in the study. In this phenomenological study, the focus is the phenomena of counselors doing online counseling services concerning their issues and concerns, and the counseling strategies and techniques that they used in facilitating the helping process among their clients. Their worldviews were examined to explore what counseling framework they developed during the pandemic and how this had been changing as they tackle various student problems. It presented specific counseling strategies they believe worked in counseling sessions aimed at addressing pandemic and non-pandemic related problems. Results showed that the issues and concerns of counselors engaging in online counseling are determined by the limitations of online counseling in responding to the needs of their clients. Counselors demonstrated professional responsibility and accountability by initiating protocols and procedures in online counseling and contextualizing counseling services for their clients. Counselors adapted to the limitations of online counseling by taking advantage of the accessibility of online platforms for counseling and using the essential helping skills in facilitating their professional duties and responsibilities. However, professional boundary concerns are evident in their pursuit of providing committed, compassionate, and competent mental health services to their clients. Finally, the counseling framework for online counseling can be achieved by combining three critical features namely the practical coping strategies, counseling protocol, and essential helping skills. Implications for counseling and education practice were discussed.

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## Keywords

College Counseling, Mental Health Services During Pandemic,  
Online Counseling Services

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## 1. Introduction

Counseling is a purposeful, private conversation that involves the process of reflection and resolution of an individual's problem through the help of a professionally trained person (McLeod, 2013). Tracing its roots, it began to be delivered as a human service in the early days of the 20th century. Counseling as a profession is defined as "the use of an integrated approach to the development of a well-functioning individual primarily by helping him/her utilize his/her potentials to the fullest and plan his/her future following his/her abilities, interests, and needs" (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2020, section 3, para. 1). The law highlights that counseling is defined as a face-to-face relationship where both the counselor and the counselee are present together as they work through the concerns of the client. The law did not specify connections organized and carried out through non-person modes of communication such as telephone or mobile phone, web or mobile applications, letters of correspondence, television, fax, etc. The physical presence of two people serves to satisfy emotional needs that cannot be met in any other medium of communication (Taylor & Buku, 2006). Be that as it may, due to developments in technology, another form of counseling is called online counseling.

Online counseling is a type of professional counseling practice where the client seeks the counselor's professional services in a remote location such as home or office. It uses information technology in the delivery of services (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). It is bidirectional, synchronous, or asynchronous, and can be an alternative to some people who cannot physically meet with their counselors; a harmonizing type of counseling service delivery (Awabil & Akosah, 2018) conducted via email, chat applications, and/or video calls. Currently, a lot of internet software, mobile, and web applications have useful features which allow the delivery of online counseling.

Attridge (2004) explained that online counseling has many benefits for the client. Being in a university setting can feed them with massive academic and extra-curricular works tantamount to stress and anxiety felt in dealing with busy schedules. Individuals find online counseling much applicable in their way of life. Moreover, some students may favor the distant method of communication, because it allows conveying themselves without restrictions and obstruction. Thus, they are more at ease expressing feelings via this modality. Meanwhile, others view online counseling as an alternative to seeking mental health services offering a non-threatening, friendlier, and more responsive interaction (Attridge, 2004). Numerous studies (Suler, 2000; Cook & Doyle, 2002; Guanipa et al., 2002) have pointed

out the positive impact of online counseling for many clients, because it allows them to have a different voice. It has provided counselors with better access to multicultural and more therapeutic choices. Online counseling was found to assist in improving the self-autonomy of clients in the helping relationship and it gives an egalitarian share of power between the client and counselor (Teh et al., 2014).

On the other hand, the very essence of online counseling unavoidably gives rise to many risks and disadvantages. One of them is the lack of face-to-face interaction between the counselor and the client, and the lack of better understanding of social cues since the counselor and the client do not see each other completely (Teh et al., 2014). Also, other disadvantages of online counseling include limited access to the internet, slow or poor connectivity, delay in reception, lack of adequate technological know-how of both the counselor and the client, the misunderstood written words through chat, and the veracity of the client's given information (Lewis & Coursol, 2007).

Lewis and Coursol (2007) studied the issues of online counseling. The authors found out that counselors are receptive to using online counseling in facilitating the resolution of the psychosocial issues of their clients. More specifically, counselor education professionals are willing to use online counseling for an array of psychosocial and mental health concerns such as personal, physical, social, spiritual, legal, and environmental problems (Lewis & Coursol, 2007). The study provided insights on how to enhance the delivery of online counseling services. The video conferencing type of online counseling showed the counselors' approval of its use since they can get a more complete picture of their clients' issues and that mimics the face-to-face type of counseling mode of delivery (Lewis & Coursol, 2007). Through this, counselors may appropriately respond to the nuances of their clients and speak more of their concerns needing resolution (Lewis & Coursol, 2007).

Ethical considerations are seen to be one of the issues and concerns in the conduct of online counseling such as suitability of clients to online counseling, informed consent and nature of professional services to be given, and adjustments when problems with internet connection arise (Maheu & Gordon, 2000). Meanwhile, this has already been addressed by the American Counseling Association (2014) through a specific code of ethics. But then again, there is much more to be done to protect both the client and counselor. A study argued that clients show positive attitudes towards online counseling because they also have higher tendencies for self-concealment (Tuliao & Velasquez, 2016). This poses a risk to both the counselor and counselee since concealment might be used by the client to manipulate the counseling relationship and may eventually lead to wrong diagnosis and intervention by the counselor. In a study done by Shaw and Shaw (2006), they found out that many counseling practitioners lack the knowledge and complete understanding of ethical standards on online counseling. The authors also argued that online counselors face the same obligations with face-to-face counseling and explained that online counselors' ethical violations include non-confidentiality,

incompetence in the use of online counseling platforms, and irresponsible handling of red flag cases such as suicide and harm (Corey, 2009).

Meanwhile, Haberstroh et al. (2008) mentioned that while online counseling offers convenience in the delivery of mental health services, some technical problems being faced on online counseling might affect the clients negatively more so if they need immediate attention. This poses a risk because counselors cannot provide complete assessment and evaluation of the clients concerning the severity of their problems. These concerns underscore the need for other means of contact tracing, alternative online counseling platforms or applications, and protocols for getting local resources in the event of emergencies (Haberstroh et al., 2008). The researchers suggest the need for comprehensive procedures in psychological screening, testing, and assessment where the details about their presenting problems and expectations of counseling, and the usage of videoconference type of online counseling interventions are considered. In terms of the process of counseling, Williams et al. (2009) posited that online counseling service delivery might not get into the depth of the counseling relationship. Thus, making it impossible to elicit action plans and achieve the set objectives of the therapy. The study showed that therapists might only focus on establishing rapport and agenda rather than the exploring and elaborating of the problems or eliciting actions in a counseling relationship among youngsters because of the limited communication modality. Similarly, Richards and Vigano (2013) also mentioned that the role of the counselor in the context of online counseling should be defined and aligned with what has been changing or changed. Another is considering online counseling as a new type of intervention. The authors noted that there is a need to develop an online counseling framework as a unique type of psychotherapeutic intervention. Future theory and research should further the understanding of online counseling regarding its efficacy and effectiveness on different counseling approaches' integration and client suitability (Richards & Vigano, 2013). Furthermore, the authors identified specific concerns when it comes to the conduct of online counseling such as (1) anonymity and disinhibition; (2) convenience; (3) adjustments with time; (4) social cues, and (5) writing styles on online counseling. From the concerns, issues are also specified, and these are (1) ethical standards; (2) professional experience and training of counselors; (3) clients' fit on online counseling, and (4) counselors' and counselees' attitudes and behaviors toward online counseling.

The practice of online counseling has emerged in developed countries such as America and Canada even before the pandemic has started. At the beginning of the '70s, mental and psychosocial services began to proliferate using internet-related modalities (Suler, 2000). In the Philippines, it can be considered as a relatively new modality to most counselors that additional training and inputs for this practice are highly needed. With the passing of R.A. 9258 or the Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004, and R.A. 10029 or the Psychology Act of 2009, the demand for counseling services continues to grow and to expand through the different types of service delivery such as online counseling (Melgar, 2013). However,

this type of service delivery remains unexplored as Filipino counselors still prefer to use the traditional face-to-face counseling modality in providing mental health services (Melgar, 2013). There are a few studies on online counseling in the Philippines since many Filipino counselors are not trained in this type of service delivery of mental health (Comscore, 2013; Melgar, 2013). Filipino counselors lack the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct counseling services using the online platform (Alleman, 2002). Only a few are very adept with technology, and they may take advantage of this type of mental health service delivery platform (Haberstroh et al., 2008).

With the pandemic, countries are experiencing a global health crisis where traditional office-based counseling is not allowed or highly discouraged. Online counseling is one of the new normal modes of delivery of counseling services in the next few years as the profession also adapts to the changing times and technological advancements.

For the counselees and varied clients, a proposed online counseling framework can help them in receiving better mental health and counseling services from their therapists. This provides principles, practices, expectations, and ethical standards concerning online counseling. Furthermore, it helps in developing a therapeutic alliance between the counselor and the counselees.

## 2. Research Objectives

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of counselors in conducting online counseling and the emerging practices and processes applied to their conduct of the services. The study sought to address the following research objectives:

1. Describe the experiences of counselors in conducting online counseling sessions concerning: a. Issues and concerns of the counselees and the counselor (e.g., circumstances of insights, decisions made, and problem solved among their counselees) b. Strategies and techniques used to address the problems raised by the counselees
2. Highlight assumptions made and meanings on conducting online counseling among the counselors.
3. Develop a counseling framework on online counseling based on the assumptions and meanings given by the counselors.

## 3. Research Design and Methods

A phenomenological research design was used to examine the lived experiences of counseling practitioners in their conduct of online counseling services to their respective clients. In a phenomenological study, the lived experiences of participants are investigated based on a specific trend that is true to a group or type of people (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The researcher attempted to describe the essence of the experiences of counselors in conducting online counseling services as they navigate their professional practice. The descriptions that were provided by the participants were used to make sense of their experiences. Information was

gathered through individual and group interviews with participants. Data were analyzed and coded for thematic significance and textural descriptions to ascertain the essence of participants' experiences in their conduct of professional practice through online counseling. More specifically, phenomenological reduction, imagination variation, and essence were used to analyze their lived experiences (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

#### 4. Research Sampling

This study included participants from private tertiary institutions in Metro Manila, Philippines which offer online counseling services that are facilitated by registered guidance counselors.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling via referral from the researcher's colleagues in the profession. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique that starts with a purpose in mind, through which decisions regarding participant selection were considered by the researcher.

Purposes of selection are translated into criteria, including knowledge of the research issue, the capacity, and the willingness of the individual to participate in the research. Seven counselors doing online counseling from selected private tertiary institutions were invited to participate in the study. Participants selected for the study are: (a) actively licensed counselors conducting online counseling; (b) working in a tertiary institution in Metro Manila offering online counseling; (c) conducting online counseling of at least three months; (d) handled or handling at least 5 counselees (regardless if successful or not, and/or on-going); and (e) computer literate/well-versed in using different online telecommunication platforms in the delivery of counseling services (e.g., Zoom, Viber, We Chat, Email, Google Meet, Facetime, etc.). The participants were chosen because of their experiences in facilitating the helping process using online means for at least three months. The three-month period is the minimum requirement because the context of online counseling is the response of practitioners in schools to the demands of the pandemic which only has been for almost a year. This means that the clients have already met their counselors and are already in the counseling phase.

This study wants to show how the practitioners can adjust their counseling practice, contextualize their strategies, tools, and techniques based on the issues and concerns of clients and of counselors experiencing the pandemic, and develop their counseling framework that responds to the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment brought by the pandemic. In addition, the researcher would also like to get initial data for comparison of the practices and initiatives of different institutions concerning the model's integration of online counseling services in their mental health interventions and/or how counselors can take care of their students during the pandemic. A shortlist based on the predefined criteria was developed to efficiently manage the selection process. Finally, the selected participants were notified through a letter specifying the expectations and objectives of their participation in the study. Counselors who do not have access to an

internet connection and/or are not conducting online sessions with their counsees were not included in the study. Results and outputs from this study were shared with the participants and the institutions they are affiliated with.

## 5. Research Participants

There are seven counselor participants for the study. Most of the participants are in early adulthood (31 - 38); one participant is in middle adulthood. Five participants are female while two participants are male. Six participants out of seven have earned at least a master's degree. Only one participant has a Doctorate. The participants served as Registered Guidance Counselors between three - nine years and functioned in different roles in varied industries between five to fourteen years.

## 6. Data Collection

The data collection was conducted through a one-hour individual interview. All participants were scheduled for the interview at their most convenient time. The researcher used a semi-structured interview to standardize the method for data collection. The interview questions focused on the following: (1) what are the issues that you face in conducting online counseling; (2) what are the concerns that you have in conducting online counseling; and (3) what are the strategies and techniques that you use in conducting online counseling. Follow up questions such as the following were provided for the participants to be able to expound their narratives: (1) what are the advantages of online counseling; (2) what are the disadvantages of online counseling; (3) how do you address the limitations/technological barriers of online counseling; (4) what made you decide to use online counseling; (5) what knowledge, skills, values or abilities do you think should a counselor have to succeed in online counseling practice; (6) what are the counseling paradigms and approaches do you think are compatible with online counseling practice; (7) who are the clients receptive to online counseling, and (8) what counseling framework have you developed in facilitating online counseling services. In addition, the cases and nature of concerns of clients were organized and ranked based on the severity per participant. Successful implementation of online counseling interventions and/or terminations was noted for all the cases handled by the participants.

## 7. Data Analysis

The study made use of Moustakas (1994) method of data analysis (Yüksel et al., 2015). Eight steps were undertaken in the data analysis namely (1) listing of relevant expressions; (2) reducing to invariant constituents; (3) clustering of salient themes; (4) validating invariant responses constituents; (5) crafting textural descriptions; (6) constructing of individual structural descriptions; (7) composing structural descriptions, and (8) synthesizing into expression (Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Steps one to five represent the process of phenomenological

reduction. Steps six and seven show the process of imaginal variation, and step eight is the essence or the complete picture of the lived experiences of participants.

The listing of relevant experiences investigated the variables relevant to the scope of the study. The researcher weeded out those words or statements that do not support or connect with the main research problems of the study. The uncommon or unique responses allowed the researcher to cluster contents into textural language so that the themes would only have a single meaning for each. All the unrelated themes were analyzed, clustered, and thematized. Meanwhile, the researcher employed comparison with other data sources. The themes were verified through observations, field notes, or literature for a clearer representation of the data. Individual textural descriptions of participants were constructed from thereof. Their experiences were described in detail using verbatim statements from the interviews through a narrative to describe and detail down the participants' lived experiences.

Meanwhile, imaginal variation focused on the construction of individual structural descriptions where the researcher imagines how the experiences of counselors occurred in the conduct of their online counseling services as he creates the structure of understanding. Composite structural descriptions followed where the researcher structures the description and describes how the experiences unfolded. The process helped the researcher to completely understand the participants' experiences with the phenomena under examination. Finally, the last method is the essence. The researcher synthesized the contents. The researcher developed two narratives containing "what occurred" and "how it occurred" to present the overall context of the lived experiences of participants. Meaning, units for each participant were determined and the common meaning as well. It included the textural and structural descriptions based on the shared meaning units that were written, and the individual meanings both in the composite and textural descriptions would be eliminated to create the essence of the experience. A universal description of the phenomenon was written based on the integration of composite structural and textural descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

## 8. Results and Discussion

Here are the general findings and discussion of the major themes found in the study based on the seven participants.

### 8.1. Key Issues and Concerns in the Conduct of Online Counseling

*Mental health, academic and/or psychosocial adjustment.* Six participants mentioned that most of their demands for online counseling involved issues concerning stress and anxiety brought about by academic requirements and interpersonal dysfunctions during flexible/online learning.

*Communication, technical issues, and time management.* Another issue that

the counselors experience during the conduct of online counseling is the usual technical problems in communication platforms, devices and access, and the management of online sessions.

*The concerns of the counselors and their reservations in conducting online counseling.* Ethical considerations are seen to be one of the issues and concerns in the conduct of online counseling such as suitability of clients to online counseling, informed consent, nature of professional services to be given, and adjustments when problems with internet connection arise (Maheu & Gordon, 2000). The communication issues brought about by the counselor participants can also be seen as their initial response to change. The time delay in the type of online counseling also provides counselors to read and reflect on their insights, the stories raised by their counsees, and even clarify questions that can be further explored in the therapeutic relationship (Haberstroh et al., 2008). Although the study done by Haberstroh et al. (2008) mentioned that the slow speed of text exchange can affect the depth and breadth of interaction. In addition, this issue can also be addressed by providing more client control and autonomy through strategic provision of assignments that cannot be further explored because of the limitations of online counseling. This will provide a sense of psychological safety among counsees (Richards & Vigano, 2013).

*Validation of Clients' Non-Verbal Cues.* The counselor participants expressed their difficulty in mapping out the nonverbal cues of their clients as they facilitate the therapeutic relationship.

The understanding of non-verbal cues is an important part of the counseling relationship that is becoming limited in the practice of online counseling. This finding is in congruence with a study done by Tuliao and Velazquez (2016). According to them, clients show positive attitudes towards online counseling because they also have higher tendencies for self-concealment. This poses a risk to both the counselor and counselee since concealment might be used by the client to manipulate the counseling relationship and may eventually lead to wrong diagnosis and intervention by the counselor.

*Confidentiality.* Another issue raised by the counselor participants is the confidentiality in the conduct of online counseling. Encryption of the platform should be secured to take care of the trust and confidence of clients seeking online counseling.

*Commitment to counseling.* In addition to important issues/concerns during online counseling is how to secure the commitment of clients to the therapeutic helping relationship. The counselor participants expressed that they are having difficulties in balancing their availability to help and the availability of clients to receive help.

## **8.2. Key Areas in Managing the Problems in Online Counseling**

*Online counseling protocols and procedures.* This strategy involves the development of counseling protocols that are similar to the face-to-face conduct of

psychosocial services. It includes setting up boundaries for counseling involvement of the practitioners, managing standard platforms and tools for online counseling services, the conduct of referrals for cases beyond the expertise of the counselor, and facilitation of counseling evaluation to determine services improvement.

*Counselor initiative.* This pertains to resourcefulness, engagement to continuous learning, and acceptance of the limitation of online counseling of the practitioners as part of their strategies in addressing the issues and concerns of them and their clients.

The general experiences of the counselor participants involve resourcefulness, engagement to continuous learning, and acceptance of the limitation of online counseling of the practitioners as part of their strategies in addressing the issues and concerns of them and their clients. The positive attitudes of the counselors in online counseling can be seen as a dependent variable in their access to technology (Teh et al., 2014). Hence, they can initiate to connect with their clients using the available means at their disposal.

*Usage of a variety of communication platforms.* The counselor participants shared that the usage of multiple communication platforms, aside from the pre-defined protocols of engagement in the conduct of online counseling, provided them with a better way to connect and facilitate the needed therapeutic relationship with their clients.

Online counseling enables the practitioners to address the questions and clarifications of clients using a variety of means about diverse topics such as mental health issues, academic, career, or adjustment. The counselors have adapted to the online counseling mode of psychosocial service where they have used the different forms to develop a gateway to provide first, second, or third level of services.

*Contextualization of counseling services.* The counselor participants shared that their services need to be adjusted based on the needs of their clients as their strategy in making sure that online counseling works. It also involves developing needs-based counseling, facilitation of empathic listening, and development of a quality therapeutic relationship.

### **8.3. Assumptions and Meaning in Conducting Online Counseling**

*Accessibility of online counseling.* The counselor participants shared that in their practice of online counseling, they thought and felt that their clients engage better, they become more open to counseling methods and the helping process and there are a variety of options and platforms available for the conduct of the therapeutic relationship.

Clients feel less pressured and uncomfortable dealing and disclosing very personal, embarrassing thoughts and feelings in the counseling relationship. Hence, counselor participants experienced ease in the conduct of their counseling sessions. It is also seen that online counseling is very convenient for the clients as they can have it any time of the day when they feel the need to consult their

counselors (Richards & Vigano, 2013) and it contributes to the accessibility of the services being provided.

*Boundaries.* Another meaning that emerged among the counselor participants' narration of their lived experiences is the need for setting up psychological boundaries. For them, it includes balancing work and life and taking care of the delineation between professional and personal aspects.

*The adaptability of counselors.* The counselors provided meaning and assumptions on the practice of online counseling. Critical themes emerged such as adaptability, the readiness of counselors in online counseling, and continuous learning.

*Application of counseling techniques.* The participants shared the same meaning concerning the relevance of counseling techniques in the practice of online counseling. Counselors cannot identify the emotions of the clients which lead to challenges in understanding their responses to counseling. There is a greater demand for counselors to connect and build rapport during online counseling. It is quite hard to apply experiential counseling techniques during online counseling because of the limitations on feedback from the counselees.

#### **8.4. Critical Areas in the Development of a Counseling Framework**

*Evidence-based counseling.* Counselor participants shared that online counseling should involve counseling strategies and techniques that are practical, scientific, and effective in assisting their clients with their issues and concerns.

*Online counseling protocol and personal counseling framework.* During the interviews, the counselor participants revealed a lot of initiatives to develop protocols and procedures, along with their counseling framework and philosophy in response to the demand for online counseling services.

*Personal and professional characteristics of counselors.* Aside from the actual counseling protocols and framework being initiated by the counselor participants, another theme that emerged from their experiences is the personal and professional characteristics of counselors doing online counseling. Counselors shall be patient, persuasive, have listening skills, the technical know-how, basic technological skills, knowledge in ethical guidelines, and crisis management.

*Compact counseling and psychological first aid.* The counselor participants shared a common meaning concerning the practicality of compact counseling strategies and psychological first aid in the conduct of online counseling. They believe in the practicality of compact counseling strategies and psychological first aid in the conduct of online counseling, and that can be integrated with the proposed counseling framework.

#### **8.5. Online Counseling Framework**

The online counseling framework based on the lived experiences of the counselor participants can be summarized into three themes namely: (1) evidence-based counseling, (2) online counseling protocol and personal counseling framework, and (3) compact counseling and psychological first aid cum personal and professional

characteristics of counselor. Each theme is considered a primary consideration in the conduct of effective and efficient online counseling relationships. For each primary consideration, suggested structures are illuminated, and the specific counseling features (practices) are discussed.

*Primary Consideration 1: Evidence-based Counseling.* Counselors who engage with online counseling should be able to include strategies and techniques that involve cognitive disputation and restructuring, mindfulness, and psychological needs. The purpose of cognitive disputation and restructuring is to psycho-educate clients with coping skills necessary to minimize emotional disturbances, decreasing self-defeating thoughts and beliefs that are affecting personal choices and behaviors, and guiding them in thinking more clearly, rationally, feel more appropriately, and acting more efficiently and effectively (Corey, 2009). It also includes strategies for managing their organized patterns of beliefs that are maladaptive and unhelpful. In addition, the practitioner should consider psychological needs whether their clients' individuals are fulfilling their needs for belonging, power, freedom, and fun in responsible and satisfying ways (Corey, 2009) and enable them to gain a sense of inner control in managing their issues and concerns. Since these existing frameworks are accessible to the counselors, therapeutic goals can be easily contextualized and applied in online counseling.

*Primary Consideration 2: Online counseling protocol and personal counseling framework.* The counselors who engage in online counseling should consider developing a protocol for professional practice such as the Informed Consent, Standard Platform, Standard Schedule, and Standard Forms. More specifically, it should outline and describe the following namely: (1) professional hours and session schedule; (2) feedback and telecommunication platform; (3) confidentiality; (4) boundaries; (5) interpretation, and (6) competence in online counseling. Counselors should maintain the professional hours in conducting their online counseling and it should be well communicated to the clients. Feedback and platform for the provision of counseling sessions should be set to prime both the counselor and counselee in the professional relationship that will be established. Aside from the platform, the feedback mechanism should also be clear with the client to facilitate clarity in the expectations in the counseling relationship. Confidentiality should be well taken care of and consider mechanisms on how to take care of data privacy of the counseling engagement. The practitioner should establish boundaries for professional practice so that work-life balance is integrated with the counseling engagement. This can be clearly articulated in the setting up of professional hours and session schedules. Meanwhile, counselors should have the initiative to revisit their understanding of the meanings being brought up to the session and in understanding the clients' experiences and insight during the professional counseling relationship. Counselors should be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills when it comes to their limitations in online counseling. It should be noted by the practitioner that to practice online counseling, a review of their competencies in telepsychology be considered. In general, the counselor should be able

to the following before the engagement with their clients: description of online counseling, counselor competencies, appointment and cancellation, relationship, ethics and confidentiality, client responsibility, termination, fees (if any), client agreement, and signature.

*Primary Consideration 3: Compact counseling and psychological first aid cum personal and professional characteristics of counselors.* Counselors should integrate compact strategies and techniques in the facilitation of online counseling sessions. Some of the features that should be present are: (1) practice of accurate empathy in accommodating the issues and concerns raised by their clients; (2) sit across, open stance, lean towards, eye contact, and relax or SOLER most especially when using video calls; (3) listening, responding and usage of the art of questioning; (4) psychological risk and harm inquiry (for mental health cases); (5) referral mechanisms and (6) self-care strategies. The compact counseling method should help the counselor establish the therapeutic alliance by practicing accurate empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness in the facilitation of the counseling relationship. These are considered the micro-skills of the counselors in making sure that the clients relate to them and so that interventions can be conducted efficiently and effectively. Counselors should also be able to conduct a basic assessment of risk and harm and listen without judgment, provide reassurance and appropriate information, encourage further professional help (if needed) and intensify the coping skills of their clients in managing their issues and concerns.

## 9. Summary

The participants identified five key issues and concerns concerning the conduct of online counseling. These are: (1) mental health, academic and/or psychosocial adjustment, (2) communication technical issues and time management, (3) validation of clients' non-verbal cues, (4) confidentiality, and (5) commitment to counseling. The counselor participants identified four key areas in managing the problems being experienced in online counseling. These are: (1) online counseling protocols and procedures, (2) counselor initiative, (3) usage of a variety of communication platforms and (4) contextualization of counseling services.

The counselor participants revealed some important assumptions and meanings that they have in conducting online counseling. More specifically, four themes emerged from their accounts namely: (1) accessibility of online counseling, (2) boundaries, (3) adaptability of counselors and (4) application of counseling techniques.

The counselor participants shared meanings and assumptions that led to the four critical areas to be considered in the development of a counseling framework for online counseling and these are: (1) evidence-based counseling, (2) online counseling protocol and personal counseling framework, (3) personal and professional characteristics of counselors, and (4) compact counseling and psychological first aid.

Counselors engaging with online counseling should be able to include strategies

and techniques that involve cognitive disputation and restructuring, mindfulness, and psychological needs. The counselors who engage in online counseling should consider developing a protocol for professional practice, such as the Informed Consent, Standard Platform, Standard Schedule, and Standard Forms. More specifically, it should outline and describe the following namely: (1) professional hours and session schedule, (2) feedback and telecommunication platform, (3) confidentiality, (4) boundaries, (5) interpretation, and (6) competence in online counseling. Counselors should integrate compact strategies and techniques in the facilitation of online counseling sessions. Some of the features that should be present are: (1) practice of accurate empathy in accommodating the issues and concerns raised by their client, (2) sit across, open stance, lean towards, eye contact, and relax or SOLER most especially when using video calls, (3) listening, responding and usage of the art of questioning, (4) psychological risk and harm inquiry (for mental health cases), (5) referral mechanisms and (6) self-care strategies.

## 10. Recommendations

For future studies, exploring the issues and concerns of counselors and counselees separately to delineate unique and common features for each. It may also help to contextualize these issues and concerns concerning the different modalities of online counseling (e.g., email, videocall, chat, and/or text). It is also suggested that the issues and concerns of counselors working in the basic education be explored, as well as those working in the different private and public settings (e.g., industry/corporate, community and hospital,), considering the different developmental stages and number of total work experience of the counselor participants.

Using the findings as a springboard to develop intervention and capacity-building initiatives for counselors as they develop online mental health and psychosocial programs catering to their different clientele. The capacity building initiatives should incorporate strategies and techniques in managing professional boundary issues that are prevalent in the practice of online counseling, in establishing effective and efficient helping/therapeutic relationships, and in using technological features of the chosen online platform for the provision of counseling services.

Applying the proposed counseling framework by integrating the primary considerations in the existing online counseling programs of practitioners. It is also suggested that the proposed framework undergo validation and more contextualization exercises to reflect the needs and realities of Filipino counselors across different settings.

## Conflicts of Interest

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

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