Current Trends

Computerized Counseling: In Search of a Humanistic Technology

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Computers are upon us for better or for worse. With the possible exception of television, no other invention of the 20th century promises to so transform our lives as does this electronic marvel. From the educational basics of "reading, 'riting, and 'rithmatic" to such household tasks as checkbook balancing, cheesecake recipe filing, and checkerboard strategizing, computers promise to help us.

This technology is now being examined as to its utility for counseling services, and a variety of publications have begun to discuss the possibilities and realities (e.g., Barón & Hutchinson, 1984; McLemore & Fantuzzo, 1982; Schwartz, 1984; Wagman, 1980, Wagman & Kerber, 1980). Of utmost concern to counselors, of course, is the humanistic application of such technology. At one extreme are those counselors who might eschew all use of such paraphernalia; at the other extreme are the uncritical faddists. The majority perhaps fall in the middle—the cautious optimists.

Recently, the American Psychological Association's Division 17 (Counseling Psychology) published an issue of *The Counseling Psychologist* devoted to the problems and prospects of computer-assisted counseling. The issue is noteworthy for its extensive discussion of theoretical concerns, especially from a humanistic, socially conscious perspective. The collection of seven articles serves as a sound introduction to the current state and future trends of computer applications, though the discussion is primarily focused on career counseling and guidance systems.

JoAnn Harris-Bowlsbey, a principal designer of the DISCOVER career guidance computer program, leads off the issue by discussing data files, their manipulation by the computer, and their importance in helping the user become a "planful decider." She highlights the computer's strength in storing and filing huge amounts of information for quick and ready access. Her explanation of the seven key ingredients that computer files must have to make them most usable is a lucid primer on the conceptual underpinnings of a computer-assisted counseling module.

Martin Katz, the creator of the SIGI career guidance package, and his colleague, Laurence Shatkin, present an extensive but succinct discussion of the structural and theoretical underpinnings of current career guidance systems. As with Harris-Bowlsbey's article, the authors enumerate several characteristics a system must have to succeed. They also extend their analysis to include a discussion of the evolution of vocational guidance and the computer's place in that history.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking and profound humanistic articulation of theory is provided by David Tiedeman in his paper focusing on the concept of "Informed Freedom." Tiedeman views the computer as an enabler of personal freedom if it helps users learn to comprehend how they themselves comprehend. The discussion is heavily grounded in a phenomenological analysis as the author integrates various developmental theories and their implications for the evolvement of an inquiring mind. Computers are viewed as metaphors for some of the ways in which we might better know ourselves.

Activity in computer-assisted counseling has not been restricted to the United States. Mindful of this, the editors include an article by two British computer specialists, A.G. Watts and Malcolm Ballantine, that surveys European contributions. A variety of systems similar in purpose to DISCOVER and SIGI are noted, and their strengths and weaknesses are evaluated.

For anyone wishing to acquire a quick introduction to the potential uses of computers within a counseling agency, the article by James Sampson will be particularly satisfying. Beginning with an elaborate but understandable flow chart diagram, Sampson carefully outlines how computers can be used at various points in the counseling process. Applications discussed include client scheduling, intake interviewing, testing, psychotherapy, and biofeedback.

One of the editors, Peter Cairo, provides an excellent synopsis of evaluative research on career guidance systems. By Cairo's own assessment, very little is known about the impact of such systems on career development. Among the issues the author poses for future study are the permanency of gains made by users, the effect of time spent using a system, and comparisons of effectiveness among systems.

In a concluding article, John Cogswell reflects on the strides made in developing computerized counseling systems by commenting on various articles presented in the issue. He focuses his commentary most on Tiedeman's exposition and specifically addresses the humanistic question, "Does the Application of Computer-Assisted Counseling Show Soul?" His answer is a qualified, though hopeful, yes.

Aside from the excellent array of technical information presented by the seven features, the recurring theme of a humanistically applied technology is a satisfying thread throughout the issue. From Harris-Bowlsbey's pursuit of "the planful decider" to Tiedeman's "informed freedom" to Cogswell's "soul," the reader will find comfort and assurance that thoughtful and sen-

sitive people are at work in the burgeoning field of computer-assisted counseling.

The issue represents a noteworthy effort to reconcile the intangible qualities of the human spirit with the palpable elements of advanced technology. To quote Tiedeman (p. 45):

> The true purpose of guidance is to make what is essential to life available with practiced ease in being and becoming even though the essential is invisible to the eye as it must be since it is in our heads, not outside us and "seeable."
>
> Guidance computers programmed to invite and work with learner inquiries offer hope that we can advance an increasing number of citizens in our civilization to states in which they know this dimension, which is essential to their being and becoming, and advance during their lives to using the state with practiced ease.

Such is the challenge for computer-assisted counseling. The future awaits us.

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