

## Helping Beginning Counselors Develop a Personal Theory of Counseling

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### **Abstract:**

Developing a personal theory of counseling is essential for beginning counselors. Current approaches de-emphasize life experiences before graduate training and fail to incorporate counselor developmental stages. This article presents a framework for strengthening development of a personal theory of counseling by integrating life experiences and counselor developmental stages with theory building approaches.

### **Article:**

Learning to be a helping professional has been described as a complex and overwhelming process (Byrne, 1995; Kottler & Hazler, 1997; Martin & Moore, 1995; Morrissey, 1996; Spruill, 1994; Young, 1998). An essential part of this process is to help students develop a coherent theoretical framework on which they can base their counseling practice. The proposed standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 1999) recognize the importance of this aspect of counselor education, stating that "Students will be exposed to models of counseling . . . and students will begin to develop a personal model of counseling" (Draft III, Standard K. 5.c, p. 12). However, preparing professional counselors to practice from a strong theoretical base requires that counselor educators do more than simply teach standard theories and models of counseling; students should also be helped to use these theories to examine and develop their own personal model of counseling as they work "toward integration in theory and eclecticism in practice" (Kelly, 1997, p. 337). Because beginning counselors typically lack the ability to conceptualize clients from a coherent, unified theoretical perspective (Watts, as cited in Morrissey, 1996), the integration of personal life experiences and counselor developmental stages may be a particularly significant challenge for counselor educators. In this article, we suggest several approaches for integrating counselor development and theory building into counselor education curricula.

### **CONSIDERATIONS IN DEVELOPING A PERSONAL THEORY OF COUNSELING**

Student development during graduate counselor training has been described as a continuum through which students move from a focus on more external, client-specific information to a point where they can focus on and integrate many complexities related to effective counseling, including variables of personality, personal and professional issues, and counseling style (Clark, as cited in Benschhoff, 1989). Thus, to be effective, counselor educators and supervisors must provide different, developmentally appropriate experiences for students and supervisees. Moreover, because developmental needs of trainees vary, timing becomes a key issue, raising questions such as, When should trainees be introduced to concepts of theory building? and What specific kinds of information and challenges should be offered at each developmental stage? If exercises or information are introduced too early, trainees may lack sufficient knowledge, self-understanding, and experience to make appropriate choices, and may succumb to pressure to "declare a theoretical orientation" without adequate preparation (Halgin, 1985).

Another key issue is what to introduce and at what level. For example, information presented in earlier stages must be clear and relatively concrete. In addition, students in early stages typically require higher levels of support and encouragement than do advanced students who can absorb more abstract concepts that require them to think and process information in more integrative ways. Thus, linking theory building to the counselor development stage is an important aspect of optimizing student learning and professional development.

Integrating a framework for theory building into graduate training programs offers a number of potential benefits. From the beginning, students would begin to develop their own personal theory of counseling along with essential skills to understand and critically evaluate different counseling approaches. Early introduction could help ease the transition from student to professional by providing counselor trainees with a structure to reconsider and revise personal theory throughout their careers. A theory-building framework could also be a useful tool for supervisors to help supervisees integrate knowledge and training with personal values and beliefs in the context of counseling with actual clients. Finally, explicitly addressing theory building in counselor training may help students better understand that professional development involves "an increasingly higher order integration of the professional self and the personal self" (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 507) by emphasizing the importance of consistency among these two life areas (Guy, 1987).

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) proposed a stage model of counselor development that defines three broad stages, each with its own characteristic processes and tasks. In the Pretraining Stage, students draw from their natural helping abilities and are concerned primarily with using knowledge from their life experience to be a sympathetic friend. The Training Stage represents a transition to counseling professional and involves organizing and supplementing natural helping behaviors with methods of functioning that are externally imposed by the training program.

In the Post-Training Stage, students become practicing counselors and face issues of integrating externally imposed expectations with their internal selves. Integral to each of these stages is personal reflection and processing of the learning experiences that occur throughout training and professional practice.

#### **A FRAMEWORK FOR THEORY BUILDING**

Theory building in counseling has been addressed in terms of theory-building questions (Piercy & Sprenkle, 1988), learning activities (Piercy & Sprenkle, 1986), principles for organizing integrative efforts (Lebow, 1987; Thomas, 1992), counselor formation activities (Byrne, 1995), theoretical orientation as a basis for practice (Liddle, 1982), and theoretical constructs and processes (Aradi & Kaslow, 1987). Although these approaches to theory building provide counselors with tools to clarify personal beliefs and practices, they de-emphasize or ignore life experiences before graduate training and fail to incorporate stages of counselor development.

The framework for theory building presented in this article has been used successfully in graduate counseling and practicum courses and in professional workshops. Our approach to theory building has three phases that correspond generally with Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1992) stages (noted in parentheses): Phase 1-Personal Beliefs (Pre-Training), Phase 2-Counseling Theories (Training), and Phase 3-Personal Theory of Counseling (Post-Training). Each phase reflects the developmental stages of students, thus facilitating its application in the appropriate stage of graduate training (e.g., beginning, advanced). For example, as beginning counselor trainees, students typically struggle to learn and understand large amounts of objective information with little time to integrate this new knowledge. For these students, focusing on Personal Beliefs (Phase 1), can help increase awareness of themselves and others by engaging them in introspective activities that encourage them to explore their personal values, beliefs, and motivations for becoming professional helpers. This focus on what students already know at a time when they are being exposed to new information related to counseling can help "ground" them (i.e., they do know something) and lay the foundation for critically considering how what they are learning fits who they are as individuals.

During Phase 2 (Counseling Theories), students study and experiment with different theoretical approaches to counseling and begin to integrate new "external" knowledge with their "self" knowledge. At this stage, students still may be overwhelmed by the amount of information to be absorbed and assimilated and struggle to integrate information into coherent and cohesive ways of thinking about or behaving with clients. In this phase, students can benefit from reviewing their personal beliefs (explored in Phase 1) in the context of what they are learning about counseling theories, approaches, and the helping process. This can be as simple as raising questions in class such as, "How does this theory fit with your beliefs about the change process?" "Do you see ways in which this approach to counseling might not work so well for you as a counselor?" or "With what kinds of

issues or clients would this theory seem to work best?" Useful tables outlining the major theories and philosophies can be found in counseling theory textbooks such as *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Corey, 1996). Counselor educators should be sensitive to the strong need of students at this stage for approval and validation. Allowing students to freely explore and discuss their beliefs without undue external influence is critical to the professional development process.

In Phase 3 (Personal Theory of Counseling), students involved in practicum and internship experiences actively practice and attempt to master counseling skills, techniques, and concepts. Through practice sessions and actual counseling with clients, students have opportunities and challenges related to "trying on" (and trying out) different theoretical approaches, strategies, and techniques. Although they exhibit varying degrees of confidence in their knowledge and skills, students in this phase are typically able to begin integrating their pretraining experiences, graduate school learning, and emerging professional practices into a personal theory of counseling (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Thus, a critical role for practicum and internship supervisors is to help students use the hands-on experience and knowledge they are acquiring to revisit, critically examine, and discuss their personal theory of counseling. This integration continues after graduation and ideally becomes an ongoing challenge for professional counselors as they move through different developmental stages in their personal and professional lives, and as details of their work change (e.g., different work environments, client populations, presenting issues, or specializations).

## APPLICATION

Counselor educators use many approaches to help students develop awareness of their personal strengths-weaknesses, worldviews, and professional positions. The framework for theory building discussed here offers a structure that can guide counselor educators to link specific approaches with appropriate counselor developmental stages. The next step is to link specific exercises and activities to each of these phases so that counselor educators and supervisors can incorporate personal theory building into learning experiences for both beginning and advanced counseling students. Although some activities may already be familiar, applying them within a theory-building framework can result in more intentional, integrative, and effective teaching to enhance student knowledge and awareness. A summary of suggested learning activities for each phase is found in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. *Framework for Theory Building***

Legend for Chart:

A - Theory Building Phase

B - Student Need

C - Classroom/Supervision Activity

A

B

C

Phase 1

Personal Beliefs

Learning a variety of information Integration of new knowledge Discovering/evaluating personal issues

Small group discussions

- Sharing of personal revelations
- Introspective activities
- Questionnaires
- Supporting personal beliefs
- Identifying beliefs and orientations of other students

## Phase 2

### Counseling Theories

- Approval and validation Susceptible to external influence

- Clarifying and integrating theories
- Reviewing personal beliefs
- Reflecting on emerging or potential theories of individual counseling
- Merging of internal and external influences
- Selecting and defending counseling approaches
- Integrating choices with previous knowledge of personal beliefs
- Identifying beliefs and orientations of other students

## Phase 3

### Personal Theory of Counseling

- Integration of pretraining experiences, graduate school learning, and emerging professional practices

- Emphasizing the connection between personal beliefs and counseling practices
- Organizing counseling theories into discrete elements (e.g., view of healthy functioning, role of the therapist)
- Comparing and contrasting theories
- Theory building questions
- Identifying beliefs and orientations of other students

Students benefit from structured classroom activities during all three phases of theory building. Specific classroom approaches in Phase 1 (Personal Beliefs) are designed to help students integrate new learning and information with personal issues and orientations and to promote personal discovery. Such activities may include conducting a theories or personal beliefs debate in which students adopt particular positions within a theoretical continuum and debate strengths and weaknesses with other students. In this activity, students often must take and justify positions that are contrary to their own. Through this exercise in perspective taking, students are forced to consider theoretical positions that they may have initially rejected. Another exercise appropriate for this phase is having students discuss the nature of the change process and their role in helping clients make changes in their lives. This activity can help students identify their fundamental assumptions and ideas about change that should assist them in critically evaluating theories to determine which ones best align with their individual beliefs about helping.

In Phase 2 (Counseling Theories), it is crucial to integrate personal beliefs with students' increasing knowledge of counseling theories. Because of strong needs for approval and susceptibility to external influences at this phase, students can benefit from activities to help them objectively view and evaluate their newly emerging theoretical positions. It is particularly important for students to integrate theoretical information with knowledge gained from discussing their personal beliefs when studying theories and preparing for the practicum-internship experience. This can be facilitated in several ways. First, it is crucial for students to integrate theoretical information with knowledge gained from discussing their personal beliefs when studying theories and preparing

for the practicum-internship experience. Aradi and Kaslow (1987) developed a comprehensive chart that allows students to examine theories and personal beliefs along six dimensions: Explanatory power, Diagnostic power, Therapeutic power, Prognostic power, Evaluative power, and Preventive power. Each of the dimensions contains questions that are appropriate for classroom discussion and can be used as the basis for a more formal written paper addressing the interrelationships of internal and external influences. Broad-based, theory-oriented questions include the following: "To what extent does the theory provide a conceptualization of dysfunction?" (Explanatory power); "How is change effected?" (Therapeutic power); and "Does the approach reflect an optimistic, neutral, or pessimistic view of the human condition?" (Prognostic power). A more structured series of discussion questions might include thought-provoking variables such as

- Dysfunction is past-, present-, or future-focused (Explanatory power)
- Diagnosis is concerned with absent-discrete behaviors, behavioral patterns, or unifying constructs (Diagnostic power)
- Therapist is nondirective; style is varied or directive (Therapeutic power).

By examining theories and personal beliefs along similar dimensions, it is easier to "develop an integrated model which is theoretically consistent and personally congruent" (Aradi & Kaslow, 1987, p. 603). The six dimensions are "atheoretical" and provide the necessary structure for students to integrate their own beliefs with different theoretical approaches. They can be used in large and small group discussions and students quickly become accustomed to thinking and conceptualizing theories and personal beliefs within these dimensions.

Another way of approaching theory building is by integrating thought-provoking questions from various related professional development viewpoints throughout a semester course. Byrne (1995) included "Counselor Formation Activities" after each chapter in the text *Becoming A Master Counselor*. Questions are designed to determine "how you know what you know" and include "Do you describe yourself as one whose knowledge and beliefs are fundamentally rooted in science, mysticism, rationalism, tradition, or another source?" and "Give studied thought to the origins or reasons for any changes in epistemic commitments you identify that have resulted in life-view changes" (pp. 43-44). Byrne suggested other activities (field tested by us) that include conducting structured interviews with practicing counselors and asking about their training, development, and theoretical orientations, and reading articles and books on counselor development, such as *What You Never Learned in Graduate School* (Kottler & Hazler, 1997), *A Curious Calling: Unconscious Motivations for Practicing Psychotherapy* (Sussman, 1992), or *The Counselor Intern's Handbook* (Faiver, Eisengart, & Colonna, 1995).

In a more formal approach, students take a more in-depth look at their personal beliefs by completing a paper titled "My View of Human Nature" or "My Personal Beliefs About Human Nature." In this paper, students expand on their previous knowledge about personal beliefs and must explain the origin of these beliefs and how the beliefs influence their worldview. Topics within the paper can include student background and life experiences, personal characteristics, beliefs-values, personal strengths-weaknesses, definitions of health and pathology, theory of personality, and philosophy or view of human nature. Variations may include using the paper as a reference or standard to compare and contrast counseling theories with personal beliefs, as a basis for discussion in class or supervision groups, or as a semester-long project that integrates theories and personal beliefs into a personal theory of counseling.

Piercy and Sprenkle (1988) developed a set of theory-building questions that are useful for integrating theoretical (knowledge), personal (beliefs), and practice viewpoints when conducting classroom activities in Phase 3, *Personal Theory of Counseling*. The questions can be used throughout the semester in group discussions as students are asked to continually examine personal beliefs, counseling practices, and their emerging personal theory of counseling. The questions are also effective tools during supervision as students are challenged to explain and justify their counseling strategies and interventions. Questions include the

following: "What are the major goals of your treatment approach?" "What personal qualities do you believe are important for the therapist to demonstrate in treatment?" "How has your counseling approach changed since entering this training program?" and "How important are the following in your own evolving theory" (e.g., intrapsychic dynamics, skill building, assessment)? The focus of the questions is on supervisees' emerging personal "style" of counseling, the appropriateness of approaches used, and consistency with personal beliefs. Conceptualizing counseling practices in this manner emphasizes the need to understand how we practice, what our approaches are based on, and the evolutionary nature of counselor development. The practicing professional also will find these questions helpful during the lengthy posttraining stage of counselor development. A yearly "check-up" is advisable for all counselors to reflect on changes in personal beliefs, theoretical orientation, and professional practices.

A particularly effective and fun activity at any phase of the theory-building model is for students to try to identify the beliefs and orientations of other students. Students gain experience in carefully examining and clarifying their own beliefs and approaches as well as in understanding the orientations of others. What can make it a fun and powerful learning experience is hearing peers think about, critique, and justify the appeal and usefulness of different theoretical approaches. This frequently results in participants reexamining their original perspectives. We have also found that students enjoy the opportunity to hear and challenge the opinions of their peers. This begins to encourage a process of peer consultation that can be critical for ongoing professional development during graduate training and throughout counselors' professional careers (Benshoff, 1992).

## **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Developing a personal theory of counseling is an essential part of the training and development of counselors and provides the basis for informed and effective counseling practice. This process begins during graduate training and continues throughout one's professional career (Byrne, 1995; Young, 1998). Providing a structured and developmentally appropriate approach to theory building in counselor training programs may increase the level of learning and reinforce theory building as an important and ongoing part of professional development.

Models of counselor development emphasize the need for appropriate timing in introducing students to each phase of the theory-building process. A theory-building framework such as the one presented here can provide counselors with a solid foundation and structure for regular evaluation of their practice and a theoretical base to understand and intervene with clients. Specific classroom activities presented can easily be incorporated into existing curricula to assist students in developing a personal style of counseling. As counselor educators, we know that students change because of their training and experiences during their graduate programs in counseling. From developmental perspectives, we also know that developmental changes take time and that efforts to affect development must be sustained and intentional. Integrating a framework for theory building into counselor education curricula from the beginning of a student's program has the potential to intentionally move him or her toward creating a strong personal theoretical foundation on which to build relationships and interventions with clients. From a training perspective, we need to develop and share a much bigger "menu" of ideas, strategies, and techniques for incorporating theory building into different courses and cocurricular experiences in ways that are appropriate to students' changing developmental levels.

In addition, research is needed to assess the effectiveness and value of such a framework for promoting counselor development during training and throughout one's career, as well as for improving counselor effectiveness in working with clients. Specifically, research is needed to examine students' developmental levels from beginning master's student to beginning (postgraduate) professional counselor. One approach would be to develop specific theory-building competencies for each stage and methods to measure student progress and determine readiness for each successive stage. In this way, student developmental progress could be quantified and training and supervision more easily individualized. Stage-specific activities, teaching methods, and interventions could be developed and compared with more traditional approaches to determine effectiveness.

Attention is also needed to identify barriers to counselor development and interventions to overcome them. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) suggested that because students and recent graduates go through an extended

period of evaluation by professors and supervisors, they often develop an external and rigid approach to their role, working style, and conceptualization abilities. Thus, concern about external evaluation can create barriers to personal reflection, self-knowledge, and effective counseling. Identifying specific aspects of evaluation that can impede student development and developing strategies to reduce the threat of evaluation can be critical in helping counselor educators and supervisors design more supportive educational environments.

The process of "integration of the professional self and the personal self (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 507) is an area of professional development about which little is known. Although it is accepted that this integration occurs, more information is needed about how the process occurs, whether or not the process can be subdivided into definite stages, the tasks that must be mastered at each stage, and the specific ways students can be prepared to more successfully master developmental challenges. Finally, we hope that our discussion of the importance of developing a framework for theory building (and the need for revisions to one's personal counseling theory throughout a professional career) will encourage debate and interest among counselor educators and supervisors and will promote further development and research in this important area of counselor training and development.

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