

## Counseling Theory: An Essential Foundation

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People in the helping professions are asking some very practical questions about the use of theory, such as: what *good* is theory? Does theory help me to be a better counselor? If useful theories of counseling exist, how do I choose one which fits my style of counseling? My purpose is to make some brief attempts at answering these questions and indicating how theory has been useful to me.

### Usefulness of Theories

My basic position is that counseling theory is not only useful but essential in improving my services to clients. First, theory helps to describe what happens in the counseling process. It provides a language of description and a rationale for explaining what takes place. Counseling theory is primarily a set of generalizations, assumptions, concepts, and models about the functioning of people in a helping relationship. Counseling theory leans heavily on concepts from psychology, particularly from personality and learning theory. This heavy contribution of behavioral science theory helps me answer questions such as: what is happening? What accounts for this behavior? What will happen if I try a different approach? Theory helps me to systematize and interpret the complex answers.

Counseling is the process of helping people to change their behavior in the direction they choose. Counseling theory is an orderly set of assumptions, concepts, and models to help describe and explain this process. Some counselors question whether theory is essential or even useful in the counseling process, since people appear to help other people in a variety of ways without reflective theorizing. The position taken here, however, is that counseling theory is not only useful but essential to the professional counselor for the improvement of his services (Brammer, 1971).

One of the principal forms of helping clients is assistance in changing their behaviors. I feel I must have some explanation for the nature of this change process.

How does the client change his behavior? It is not sufficient to state merely that he changed. Was the change predicted and explained by my theory? In other words, did my generalized theory help me to predict what would happen under certain conditions with specific clients?

Theory helps to focus on those techniques which counselors deem most effective. For example, if a theory stresses rational problem-solving approaches to behavior change, a counselor will select those methods consistent with this view. If, on the other hand, feelings are the focal issue in the theory then his counseling behavior will reflect effective handling of feelings as a major activity.

As I explored ideas about what was happening in my counseling, I developed hypotheses about client and counselor behavior which I then tested through research. A theory is useful, then, to the extent that it suggests research questions. For example, does increased counselor self revelation increase productive client self revelation? Is there an optimum amount of revelation for certain counseling goals? A theory also helps to integrate findings from research in the behavioral sciences. A theory, to be useful, therefore, should have many hooks on which to hang facts from the research of others.

Counseling theory is an intellectual tool to help me think about my own as well as my client's behavior. It helps me to plan strategies, approaches, and goals. It gives me some guidelines for evaluating progress and performance. Thus, my theory helps me not only to explain and plan, but it offers me a basis for criticizing my own behavior.

The principal use of theory is to describe and explain what the counselor observes about his interactions with his client. Theory gives the counselor intellectual tools important to him in defining what he is doing with clients. It systematizes and simplifies the complexities of his observations.

Moreover, since the basic function of counseling is to help clients change their behavior, the counselor needs to know about the nature of the human personality—how it develops and how it changes (Brammer, 1971).

My theory, furthermore, contains a collection of value premises which relate to specific client goals. My theory also incorporates my views on the key problems of existence, such as: freedom, determinism, nature of man, nature of knowledge, nature of change, and the purpose of life itself. So, a counseling theory contains, in part, a statement of belief covering basic value assumptions and desired counseling outcomes.

#### Describing a Counseling Theory

My second point pertains to the question: do useful theories exist? I have found great difficulty fitting my observations, values, research interests, and ideas into any of the present theories. I believe strongly that each people helper, by whatever label—counselor, social worker, teacher, or psychologist, for example, must develop his own theory. There is no one theory or cluster of theories which can satisfy all the counselor's special views, experiences, and work settings. Each of us has had unique life experiences; and while frequently there is much commonality among our outlooks, each of us must take responsibility for developing his own theories of counseling and learning. The major theory writers did just that. They wrote about their observations from their perspectives and times. It would be foolish to take on their theoretical views as our own in the manner of a disciple.

Because each counselor brings his unique background and value system to his observations and descriptions of this process, different theories have inevitably developed. As observers began to articulate their theories, other counselors saw these views as similar to their own. Thus, schools of counseling have arisen since the 1920's. . . . (Brammer, 1971).

How then do I develop my own theory? First of all, I think it is important to know what the theoretical writers about human behavior from antiquity to the modern times of Freud, Rogers, May, and Skinner have had to say about the human condition and behavior change. They have transmitted brilliant and useful in-

sights through their writings. We can use these theories as intellectual tools to fashion our own ideas.

The second step is to reflect on our own unique life experiences and ask ourselves the critical questions about values, relationships, and learning raised above. It helps to share these ideas with others as a means to honing them into a theory of counseling based on gleanings from others and our own observations and life experiences. This final product includes several dimensions: a *developmental* thrust to explain how human growth takes place, a *structural* view to explain how the personality is organized, a *philosophical* outlook to detail the goals of counseling, a *research* focus to develop and incorporate new knowledge, and a *dynamic* dimension to account for the process of change.

This process of developing a personal theory is a lifelong task. A counseling theory is a living phenomenon; it changes throughout life. Finally, I wish to emphasize that each of us has a theory of counseling, even if it is ragged and implicit, because we operate from some set of assumptions. The task before us then, is how to make our implicit assumptions more explicit, systematic, and useful.

#### Current Theories of Counseling

There are about a dozen major theories of counseling with hundreds of variations. It is difficult to make generalizations about them since they reflect different purposes and vantage points for answering the basic philosophical and psychological questions posed earlier. Some theories, for example, deal only with vocational development and choice, others with family interactions, and still others with severe emotional disorders. Some theories cover broad ranges of human behavior in general terms. Current theories represent all stages of complexity and development. Many theories are identified by the name of the original developer. I will not discuss specific theories by name of the writer in view of the brevity of this article and because specific theory writers and their views are readily available (Patterson, 1966).

I identify three broad trends into which individual theories can be placed. One group, the cognitive, is characterized by rational, problem-solving, and learning processes. The counselor with this emphasis sees counseling as a learning situation where information,

specific goal-setting, problem-solving, and decision-making take place. The use of tests with a personality trait and mental factor rationale is a prominent feature. The counselor's role here is to draw clear goal statements from clients, provide techniques of behavior modification, such as operant conditioning and desensitization, to help the client reach his goals. The focus is on specific behaviors which he can control and precise goals which he can reach. Success is determined by the degree to which the client changes his behavior or moves toward his goals (Krumboltz, 1966; Wolpe, 1958).

A second large group of counseling theory writers focuses on phenomenology. Attention is given to feeling states, individual perceptions and relationships. The key counseling function is to try to enter the personal world of the client and understand the way he feels and perceives his reality. Feelings of the client become the center of attention in the present. Much interest is expressed in the nature of the relationship and the emotional interaction between counselor and client. The counselor's principal role is to facilitate awareness of self on the assumption that the client can then choose and act more wisely on the basis of that awareness. The general goal of counselors in this group is to help clients work out smooth and functional relationships between self and environment, not in an adjustment sense, but in a more integrated active change mode. The existential offshoots of this view emphasize particularly man's experiencing of himself in his present environment and his necessity to face the principal issues of existence, such as: freedom, suffering, death, joy, anxiety, and meaning.

While the psychoanalytic theorists fit generally in the large category above, they are in a special group by themselves. A key focus is on feelings and internal states of being; but a large part of the theory deals with resolution of intrapsychic conflicts. Man is perceived as being in a state of constant war among the parts of himself: his rational ego functions, his impulsive pleasure-seeking id functions, and his stern, censoring superego. These conflicts are managed through an elaborate system of defense mechanisms. The counselor's role is one of reconstructing the person's developmental history and looking at causation in the reality of the present psychoanalytic relationship. The aim is to help the client find

more productive and functional ways of managing his conflicts and expressing his feelings. All of this theory is placed in an elaborate deterministic framework with a metaphorical language based on classical mythology. Consequently, it is a difficult theory to master and is used largely in clinical rather than educational settings. Counselors often utilize practical concepts from psychoanalytic theory, such as defense mechanisms; but few identify themselves totally with this view.

A third large group of counseling views is known broadly as eclectic. I think it is the most frequently-held view considering statements of numerous counselors who are trying to develop broad flexible approaches to counseling problems. No theory is inclusive enough for the eclectic counselor, so he examines all views and attempts to integrate them into a larger framework which includes cognitive and behavioral approaches, and at the same time confronts the challenging issues posed in the subjective orientations of phenomenology. Eclectic counselors find it difficult to accept restricted views of the counseling process implied in terms such as "client-centered," "behavioral," "reality-oriented," "experiential." All counseling is client-centered and behavioral. These labels are meaningless as descriptive terms. What is needed is more precise identification of behaviors and issues without getting lost in minute problems, obscure arguments, and confusing rhetoric. Eclectic counselors try, therefore, to be as inclusive as possible. They try to avoid focusing on one aspect of the counseling task, such as relationship, feeling, experience, or information. They attempt also to develop a broad spectrum of methodology in keeping with their flexible views (Brammer & Shostrom, 1968).

If there is a unifying element among eclectic counselors it is a general kind of communication theory. An important element in counseling is understanding, and the key to understanding is clear communication at cognitive and emotional levels (Fullmer, 1971).

Studies have appeared over the past ten years indicating that counselors tended to become more eclectic in their theoretical orientations with increasing experience. Differences, therefore, tended to be more sharply identified at theoretical and technique levels with younger counselors. I am convinced that an emergent eclecticism is the way the future is going. It is the closest approximation to a general behavior theory we have,

granted that it falls far short of the ideal we need. It is an attempt at an open system which accepts new ideas and reconciles conflicts and inconsistencies.

There are limitations to the eclectic stance, however. There is a tendency of many counselors not to commit themselves to the task of broad personal theory development; so they take a lazy eclectic's way out: picking and choosing uncritically from the gigantic buffet of counseling theory. Another difficulty is that the eclectic theorist generally tries to include too many concepts and explain too much of human behavior. The eclectic counselor may tend to gloss over critical issues which separate theorists. For example, the problem of how behavior changes is very controversial. Does behavior change come after understanding and insight? Does it change after environment is altered in some significant way? Does it change after seeing a model? An eclectic tries to incorporate several styles of learning and multiple explanations of behavior change into his theory until such time as empirical research suggests an answer.

Counselors ask constantly for answers to specific client problems. We cannot learn unique solutions to each of the varied problems we face daily. We must be able to generalize from our experience, our theory, and from findings of the behavioral sciences. We must strive constantly to make our theories practical and to validate them with empirically derived knowledge. Too much of counseling theory is speculation and rationalization. We need such an experientially and factually based theory so that we can determine answers for ourselves, rather than running to the "experts" who themselves often are confusing and contradictory.

To accomplish the task described above we need to look beyond the traditional personality, learning, trait-factor, and vocational choice theories developed in psychology. We need to examine and incorporate concepts and findings from the areas of cognitive development, decision-making, organizational theory, value theory, field theory, role theory, communications theory, and social influence theory. In other words, the counselor must face the lifelong task of transforming himself into an applied behavioral scientist to meet the complex and demanding challenges of counseling (Thoresen, 1966).

Many theory innovations grow out of concrete needs and the tryout of micro methods with specific client

populations. Examples of labels for recent theoretical positions which attempt to explain a portion of human behavior are "transactional," "bioenergetic," "experiential," "self-fulfilling," "implosive," and "self-actualization."

At present, the whole area of theory in the helping services is in transition. Hope for the future, in my opinion, lies in dealing realistically with the paradox of discovering detailed relationships among counseling variables through research and of continually integrating objective behavioral views with subjective experiential ideas through cognitive speculation. Thus, our theory can serve as a framework for new facts developed from research and as a screen on which we can temporarily project ideas to fill the knowledge gaps.

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