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Is The Personal Theoretical? A Critical Incident Analysis of Student Theory Journals

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Abstract

Journal entries from 23 masters students enrolled in a counseling theories course were analyzed using Critical Incident methodology to identify students' self-disclosures and connection to counseling theories. Seven different patterns of connecting theoretical information to personal experiences emerged. The authors present a discussion of how the findings and resulting framework can contribute to the teaching of counseling theory and the reflective process of identifying theoretical orientation.

Author's Notes

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The role of theory in counseling practice and its relationship to the identity of the field has consistently divided authors on whether theory has lost some value (e.g. Gerber, 2001), or retains a central role in the practice of counseling and development of counselors (e.g. Cheston, 2000; Hansen, 2006; Norcross & Prochaska, 1983; Spruill & Bensoff, 2000). Additionally, the growing body of process and outcome research and identified common factors supports the claim that the largest percentage of change in therapy can be attributed to the therapeutic relationship and counselor traits (e.g. Grencavage & Norcross, 1990; Lambert & Barley, 2001), underscoring the value of therapeutic common factors shared across theories over the strengths of individual theories. Theory nevertheless remains an essential part of counselor training, as highlighted by the inclusion of theory as part of the common core curricular experiences outlined in the 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards. The present study adds to the limited but important body of literature on the teaching and learning of counseling theories. Specifically, we focus on the processes employed by graduate level counseling students in integrating personal experiences with their growing understanding of counseling theories.

Learning Counseling Theory and Adopting Theoretical Orientation

Theory in counselor education. Among the many requirements identified as necessary to the development of professional counselors, the CACREP (2016) standards reference counseling theories across several of the common core curricular areas, including social and cultural diversity (CACREP, 2016, II.F.2.b, p.10) human growth and development (CACREP, 2016, II.F.3.b-d, p.10) helping relationships (CACREP 2016, II.F.5.a, p.11), and group work (CACREP 2016, II.F.6.a, p. 12). CACREP (2016) further directs that programs are to include

"processes for aiding students in developing a personal model of counseling" (CACREP, 2016, II.F.5.n, p. 12).

These standards reflect wider agreement surrounding the value of understanding theory to effective counseling practice (e.g.; Granello & Hazler, 2000; Hansen, 2006; Norcross & Prochaska, 1983; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1988). Having a theoretical framework can help counselors organize clinical data and provide guidance for appropriate interventions (Hansen, 2006). Theoretical orientation has been identified as one of the key growth areas for counseling students in the supervision experience (Stoltenberg et al., 1988). Additionally, learning counseling theory has been viewed as helping students move from dualistic to multiplistic thinking (Granello & Hazler, 1998), thus promoting a shift from right-and-wrong to more nuanced conceptualizations.

Modern and postmodern views of theory and teaching theory. To date, no national study has systematically examined how theories are being taught, or which instructional methods yield different results. A review of the literature reveals a familiar modern/postmodern divide among the different methods of instruction described. The modernist approach, thought to be the most commonly applied pedagogical strategy, includes didactic instruction that emphasizes the introduction of terminology, historical origins, and important concepts, likely introducing experiential learning opportunities after key concepts have been introduced (Guiffrida, 2005; Rigazio-Digilio, 2001).

Several authors have identified limitations to the modernist approach and have proposed adaptations. Dollarhide, Smith, and Lemberger (2007) suggested implementing Transparent Counseling Pedagogy (TCP), which was designed to provide a realistic clinical demonstration in the classroom, promote student involvement for socially constructed learning, and make

transparent the counselor's thinking. Cheston (2000) offered another adaptation through the introduction of the "ways paradigm," which helps scaffold understanding of the many counseling theories and techniques by organizing them around a framework of three principles: a way of being, a way of understanding, and a way of intervening. Brubaker, Puig, Reese, and Young (2010) provided yet another adaptation through the use of a social justice paradigm (*emancipatory communitarianism*), which infused the traditional framework with social justice, constructivist, and multicultural principles, promoting reflection on the cultural strengths and limitations of students' chosen theoretical orientation.

Other authors have suggested postmodern alternatives to traditional pedagogical strategies. Spruill and Benshoff (2000) critiqued the modernist approach for failing to incorporate students' life experiences before graduate training, and for not considering counselor developmental stages. They suggested a constructivist process of integrating knowledge and training along with values and beliefs to build towards a personal theory. Similarly, in the Emergence Model (Guiffrida, 2005), students are taught to observe and reflect upon their own natural tendencies in real-world practice, considering the strengths and limitations of the helping instincts that come naturally to them (Guiffrida, 2005). Lastly, Hansen (2014) challenged the modernist approach of classifying theories according to their common features, contending that this is of little value to counseling practitioners, and proposed incorporating a model of theory categorization that focuses on the various uses of theory.

Identification of theoretical orientation. It has often been suggested that a student's early identification of theoretical orientation can be beneficial. Aligning oneself with a developed theory can provide a sense of confidence and competence to counseling students who often experience significant anxiety that can negatively impact their work with clients (e.g.

Granello & Hazler, 2000). Conversely, it has also been cautioned that encouragement towards early identification of theoretical orientation may place students at risk of theoretical foreclosure by preventing them from first exploring their own perspectives of human growth and change (Bernard, 1992).

Balancing those perspectives, several authors have viewed theoretical orientation as part of a larger developmental process. In their qualitative study, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) identified themes indicating that as the process of professional individuation evolves, individuals are able to determine what is most congruent with their sense of self, resulting in a core set of theoretical orientations. Similarly, Watts (1993) proposed that personal theory development occurs in four stages, two of which occur during graduate training. In the first stage of exploration, students take internal inventories of attitudes and beliefs while also exploring the major theories of counseling. In the second stage, the examination stage, students choose one or two theories most closely aligned with their own values and beliefs as the base of one's personal theory. Finally, in their grounded theory study, Auxier, Hughes, and Kline (2003) included theoretical information as part of a larger recycling identity formation process where learning experiences are integrated into students' process of identifying, clarifying, and reclarifying their professional identities as counselors.

Factors in choice of theoretical orientation. There is a considerable body of research surrounding factors related to one's choice of theoretical orientation. Research has shown epistemic style and views on feedback (Neimeyer, Prichard, Lyddon & Sherrard, 2001), personality traits (e.g. Buckman & Barker, 2010; Erickson, 1993; Fredrickson, 1993; Varlami & Bayne, 2007), cognitive style (Barrio Minton & Myers, 2008; Lochner & Melchert, 1997), philosophical assumptions (Buckman & Barker, 2010; Murdock, Banta, Stromseth, Viene, &

Brown, 1998; Norcross & Prochaska, 1983), and interpersonal control (Murdock et al., 1998) as related to choice of theoretical orientation. Additionally, one study showed that a theory's ability to explain one's own problems was found to have a stronger relationship to theoretical choice than client factors (Norcross & Prochaska, 1983). A connection between interpersonal experiences—such as one's relationship with a supervisor, therapist, or teacher—and theoretical orientation selection has also been found (Buckman & Barker, 2010; Steiner, 1978).

In studies specifically focused on counseling students, some results have contradicted those represented in the broader literature. While personality traits have been found to be related to choice of theoretical orientation, amongst beginning counseling students the same relationship was not indicated. In a study of 132 students enrolled in a counseling theories course, Freeman, Hayes, Kuck, and Taub (2007) found no significant relationship between a variety of personality traits and theoretical orientation preference. In contrast to their hypothesis, Murdock et al. (1998) did not find that supervisor theoretical orientation was related to student's choice of theoretical orientation.

The Missing Link: Purpose of the Present Study

While a thorough review of the literature offers insight into the varying strategies for teaching theory, and the factors related to choice of theoretical orientation, there is no research bridging the two by exploring the process through which students make sense of theoretical information. It has been proposed that counselors are most effective when operating within a theoretical framework that is consistent with their personal philosophy, worldview, and experiences (e.g. Buckman & Barker, 2010; Fear & Woolfe, 1999; Murdock et al., 1998), yet there is a lack of research exploring the work that students do to begin making those determinations.

Research Question. The purpose of this study was to identify the processes that students employ in applying theory to personal experiences through analysis of journals written in a counseling theories course. The research was guided by one primary question: how do students apply theory to their personal experiences?

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 23 graduate students in a counseling theory course at a northeastern university, and included 18 women and five men. The racial makeup of the sample included Caucasian (n=17), African American (n=3), Indian-American (n=1), and international (n=2; Korean and Turkish) participants. The majority of students in this sample were first-semester matriculated students in a graduate program in counselor education. The participants in this sample ranged from 22 to 38 years of age.

Design

Critical incident technique. Increasingly, researchers in counseling have implemented the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (e.g. Kiweewa, Gilbride, Luke, & Seward, 2013; Trepal, Bailie, & Leeth, 2010; Wong, Wong, & Ishiyama, 2012). While initially introduced as a technique intended to examine behavioral processes, Woolsey (1986) recognized CIT's applicability to counseling psychology research due to the method's flexibility in encompassing qualities or attributes; its ability to explore differences or turning points, and its exploratory capabilities in the early stages of building theories or models. Though CIT is a deliberate process composed of specific procedures, from its inception Flanagan (1954) contended that CIT "should be thought of as a flexible set of principles that must be modified and adapted to meet the

specific situation at hand" (p. 335). The inherent flexibility of CIT is seen in its applicability to a wide range of topics across disciplines (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005).

CIT is a qualitative research method that consists of a set of procedures for collecting, analyzing, and reporting observed incidents of special significance to participants in a clearly defined environment/activity (Flanagan, 1954). It involves collection of brief, written, reports of actions in response to explicit situations of problems in defined fields. An incident may be considered critical when the action taken contributed to an effective or ineffective outcome (Woolsey, 1986). The collection and subsequent analysis of incidents in CIT facilitates the application of those observations to solving practical problems and developing principles or theories (Flanagan, 1954). CIT has evolved from exclusive focus on direct observations to retrospective self-report, and from task analysis to examining personal experiences, psychological constructs, and emotions (Butterfield et al., 2005).

Procedure in CIT. Flanagan (1954), proposed five steps in conducting a critical incidents study. These include: a) a clear and concise statement of the purpose or aim of the study; b) development of plans and specifications for the types of data to be collected; c) collecting the data; d) analyzing the data; and e) plans for interpreting and reporting results. Flanagan (1954) identified the data analysis as the most difficult and important step of the process, stating that the goal is to create a useful categorization scheme of the data while also "sacrificing as little as possible of their comprehensiveness, specificity, and validity" (p. 344). As such, Butterfield et al. (2005) additionally outlined a three-step process to analyzing the data. First, a frame of reference based on the use of the data is determined. Second, categories are formulated inductively using insight, experience, and judgment. Third, a decision on the level of specificity to be used in reporting the data is made.

Strengths of CIT. Specific to the present study, CIT offered several methodological strengths not found with other designs. First, as the name implies, CIT allows for explicit focus on identified critical incidents. In this present study, the authors wanted to specifically look at students' self-disclosure and their application of theory. The CIT methodology provided a clear process for isolating those incidents and analyzing them within a meaningful frame.

Second, as previously mentioned, data analysis in CIT is conducted by forming categories that emerge from the data and determining the scope (general to specific) of those categories (Butterfield et al., 2005; Creswell, 1998). Unlike other forms of qualitative coding that seek to identify themes, the use of CIT in psychological research has highlighted its strength in identifying processes that can contribute to the generation of models of theories (Butterfield et al., 2005).

Finally, in CIT analysis the researchers establish categories with both operational definitions and self-descriptive titles (Butterfield et al., 2005; Creswell, 1998). This allows for the overlay of the identified categories onto similar processes. Given the relative lack of literature on the topic of the current study, the authors sought a methodology that could produce a frame that might prove useful to the process of educating counseling students in theory.

Methodological considerations. As with any methodology, there are considerations when using CIT, two of which are related to the present study. First, Flanagan (1954) stated that the expertise of the researchers is an important consideration, as their skill at identifying the critical incident and working to analyze it is essential to the process. As such, it is recommended that at least one researcher have experience with CIT (Britten, Borgen, & Wiggins, 2012). Second, Butterfield et al. (2005), in their meta-analysis on the use of CIT for psychological research, found few consistent standards around credibility and trustworthiness checks for

researchers conducting CIT research. In reviewing those checks that were present in the literature, they made several recommendations dependent upon the specific application of CIT. Relevant to this study, submitting the tentative categories to another expert for review (Butterfield et al., 2005); asking an independent rater to place critical incidents into the tentatively established categories (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954); and comparing tentative categories against the extant literature for theoretical validity (Butterfield et al., 2005) emerged as the most appropriate checks.

Procedure

Data was collected across the span of a semester in a theories course taught by the second author in a CACREP accredited counselor education program in the northeastern United States. As part of the course requirements, students were asked to write weekly journals, which would be collected at two different points (midterm and final) during the semester. The theories course was taught using a text that focused on a different major theory each chapter. As such, students were asked in their journals to respond to the following questions related to the theory discussed that week:

1. What did I learn about myself from this theory?

2. What specific concept struck me most deeply from this theory?

3. What might I do differently now as a counselor, since I know more about myself?

At each of the collection points (midterm and final), the instructor (second author) provided some feedback to students, generally in the form of questions to promote deeper thinking, or validating statements about what the student had shared. While the entries varied greatly in depth of sharing and application of theory, many students engaged in personal sharing in a way that was structured around the prompts provided and not simply stream-of-

consciousness. The resulting data set consisted of 230 journal entries. Each entry was approximately two typed and double spaced pages long, totaling 571 pages. The first author removed identifying information, compiling the entries into one document.

In this study, students were asked to self-report on how they could use the theories covered in class and the readings to better understand themselves. No training was provided to student participants about how this should be done since, as Woolsey (1986) noted, use of self-report renders training of persons unnecessary, though there may be a need to orient participants to the activity. Students were oriented to this activity through assignment guidelines. Due to the nature of the assignment, students self-selected which personal experiences to share. Thus, in accordance with CIT, while the authors did not absolutely control the specific types of situations under observation, the guidelines communicated that personal reflection would be expected.

Researchers

Subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research and in order to establish validity it is essential that researchers acknowledge the influences on the data collection and analysis (Choudhuri, Glauser, & Peregoy, 2004). In CIT, researchers must examine at each stage in the process what biases they might have introduced into the analysis (Flanagan, 1954). The authors discussed extensively their respective and collective positions and preconceived notions related to this project. Both authors were white females in positions of power relative to the participants (the first author was a doctoral student at the time of this study; the second a tenured professor). Both authors had some contact with the participants in the study, the first author as teaching assistant in other courses and supervisor to two students in the sample, and the second author as the instructor of the course in which this data was collected.

Both authors had experience working with theory in clinical and academic settings and processed their own observation of the theory-practice gap. The first author has worked in community clinical settings as a counselor and supervisor and has had less experience in the role of counselor educator. The second author has had clinical experience working in schools and in the community as a counselor and supervisor, and as a tenured faculty member who has taught counseling theory for multiple semesters.

Before analyzing of the data, both authors recognized a shared bias towards a process of reflection deeper than whether a student likes or dislikes a certain theory. They discussed their beliefs of what students "should" do for this assignment, with a shared preference for students sharing a personal disclosure and then examining that disclosure through the lens of theory. The second author additionally identified that her initial reaction to the data was that some students did the assignment "wrong." The authors' shared awareness of their positionality and bias informed subsequent choices of trustworthiness checks in the data analysis. Lastly, the second author had experience with CIT methodology on other research projects, and as such served as research mentor to the first author.

The researchers closely followed the ethical research standards outlined by the American Counseling Association and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision throughout the analysis process. An exemption was granted by the Institutional Review Board for the data used in this study, as it was collected during the process of teaching. Thus, although students were informed ahead of time that their work might be used in future research, students in this study were not given the option to opt out. To preserve the anonymity of students as much as possible, the first researcher, who had not been involved in the course where these journals were collected, removed all identifying information from the data set. The data were collected

about one year before this analysis, thus allowing for separation between the second researcher's evaluation of the journals and the analysis of the data.

Data coding and analysis

The first author initiated the identification of critical incidents by reading through the entire data set and highlighting the critical incidents. According to Flanagan (1954), the criteria for selecting critical incidents is generally thought to be: 1) they consist of antecedent or contextual information, 2) they contain a description of the experience itself, and 3) they describe the outcome of the incident. Flanagan (1954) also advocated flexibility of the approach to meet the needs of a specific research question therefore, the authors agreed upon inclusion criteria relevant to this study. To be identified as a critical incident, the student must: 1) describe a personal experience or other self-disclosure, and 2) describe the outcome, or the application of theory to that experience or self-disclosure. Using these criteria, 313 individual critical incidents were identified. In order to triangulate their coding procedures, the second author randomly reviewed and coded several journals for critical incidents, in order to affirm consensus on what constituted a critical incident.

In several cases, students did not provide a self-disclosure, instead simply stating facts or a perspective about the theory. Conversely, some students provided a self-disclosure with no connection to theory. An intentional decision was made that the absence of either self-disclosure or connection to theory would still be considered a critical incident. The authors determined that excluding instances of non-self-disclosure or non-connection to theory would likely miss an important process represented within this data set. Further, the authors decided that eliminating those instances based on a view that the student had "done the assignment wrong" could introduce bias into the analysis.

Critical incidents were divided into 1) self-disclosure, and 2) connection to theory and were input into a two-column chart. Critical incident pairs were cut into separate slips of paper to allow for manual sorting. The authors together sorted an initial sample of approximately one-third of the incidents into categories, and identified six tentative categories which they labeled using a narrative description of the process being used. At this stage, the authors checked these tentative categories against the scant literature on this topic for theoretical validity. The tentative categories seemed consistent with the factors related to theoretical choice identified in the literature. The first author also reviewed the tentative categories with other counseling professionals in a research seminar format. The authors subsequently added a seventh category, to distinguish between expressing an affective or cognitive response and stating a formed opinion (Table 1; processes 5 and 6).

With the tentative categories established, the first author then independently sorted the remaining incidents. The second author was then given a sample of the incidents to sort and compare to the first author's categorization. Finally, in accordance with the CIT trustworthiness checks previously described, an independent reviewer was given the category headings, operational definitions and a random sample of incidents to sort. Inter-rater reliability was found between the independent reviewer and the authors' categorizations. Peer debriefing was employed through discussing preliminary findings at several professional conferences.

Findings

Since classification of incidents according to CIT must be guided by the intended outcome and use of the study in question (Butterfield et al. 2005; Flanagan 1954; Woolsey, 1986), all identified categories and their headings reflected a particular process through which students applied theoretical information to their personal experiences. From the analysis, the

following seven processes were identified and labeled: personal belief is lens; theory is lens; theory provides solutions; personal experience is lens; personal response influences theoretical application; opinion about theory influences theoretical application; no self-disclosure provided. The seven final categories were mutually exclusive, meaning that a single critical incident could not be classified into two categories. In keeping with CIT, the self-descriptive titles are accompanied by operational definitions below and in the accompanying table (Table 1).

Table 1

Application of theory to personal experiences

Process Number	Process of applying theory to self-disclosure (Self-descriptive title)	Number of critical incidents	Description (Operational definition)	Examples (Narrative/ summary of critical incidents)
1	Theory is lens	113	Student shares a personal experience and examines this disclosure through the lens of specific theory.	*Student shares that s/he is going through a divorce. Student applies principles from existentialism to recognize that s/he can find meaning in a painful experience.*
2	Personal experience is lens	93	Student shares a personal *experience* and critiques the theory through the lens of this personal disclosure.	*Student shares that s/he did not have a father growing up. Student states that, based on this, s/he doesn't see how Freud's theories make any sense, especially since the Oedipal and Electra complex can't apply to people like him/ her.*
3	No self-disclosure provided	44	No self-disclosure provided; student simply states or summarizes facts and information about theory	*"Adlerian theory includes the importance of birth order."/ "Freudian theory is very focused on the sub-conscious."*
4	Personal belief is lens	38	Student identifies a personal *value or belief* and uses the belief to confirm or refute specific theory.	*"I am not religious at all, and because existentialism seems to be rooted in religious beliefs I don't think it would be helpful to people."*

5	Personal response influences theoretical application	11	Student gives an observation about the theory and an affective or cognitive response; uses that response to affirm or reject specific theory.	*Student expresses feeling "irked" by learning the history behind RCT, and thus not open to the theory. / Student expresses feeling "disgusted" by her/his perception that everything about Freudian psychoanalysis is sexist, and paints women in a very ridiculous light.*
6	Opinion influences theoretical application	7	Student does not provide a self-disclosure; instead states opinion about the specific theory (or elements of the theory).	*"I like the optimism of solution-focused therapy."/ "Adlerian theory does not have anything new to offer."/ "Freudian theory can be used to justify child abuse, which is dangerous."*
7	Theory provides solutions	7	Student shares a personal problem and applies specific theory to generate possible solutions.	*Student shares that s/he procrastinates in grad school; applies behavioral interventions to create a study plan.*

Table1.

Process 1: Theory is lens- Share personal disclosure/ examine disclosure through theoretical lens. In 113 incidents, students engaged in a process of describing personal experiences and using the theory to explain or examine those experiences. Students who applied this process most closely met the stated goals of the assignment and generally expressed an awareness of a limitation, strength, or possibility about the theory learned through their application of it. For example, a student shared that s/he experiences chronic anxiety. Applying the lens of cognitive behavioral theory, the student states that her anxiety is the result of dysfunctional thinking.

Process 2: Personal experience is lens- Share personal experience/ examine theory through the lens of the disclosure. Different from the first process identified, in 93 incidents students employed a process of sharing a personal experience and examining the theory through

the lens of that disclosure. Students used their personal experiences and worldview to either affirm or discard the theory's merits and utility. For example, a student shared that s/he was raised by a single parent and uses this disclosure to critique psychoanalytic theory.

Process 3: No self-disclosure provided. In 44 incidents, students did not present a self-disclosure and instead stated facts about a theory. These incidents represent students who showed ability to absorb and repeat facts about theory, but did not demonstrate application of the theory or reflection on theoretical concepts. Examples of this included students presenting detailed information about the core constructs of the theory, often citing the course text, with no application to the self.

Process 4: Personal belief is lens- Identify a personal belief, use that belief to confirm or refute theory. Of the 313 incidents identified in the data, 38 represented a firmly held and stated belief or value, rather than a personal experience as directed. Students in this category refrained from describing something that they learned through the theory, using their belief to either confirm or refute the utility of the theory. Frequently, the critical incidents in this category focused on one specific aspect of a theory, such as a student who stated that s/he believes that all people are innately bad, and subsequently disagrees with person-centered therapy.

Process 5: Personal response influences theoretical application- Give an observation about the theory that may reflect an inaccurate or incomplete understanding / express an affective or cognitive response. In 11 incidents, students expressed strong affective and/ or cognitive responses to aspects of theories, and did not move past their response to further application. Students engaging in this process appeared to be limited in their reflectivity due to

their strong initial responses. An example of this process is a student who expressed being disgusted by the fact that psychoanalysis paints women in a very ridiculous light.

Process 6: Opinion influences theoretical application- No self-disclosure provided; state opinions of elements of theory. In seven incidents students expressed only an opinion about a theory, with no connection back to oneself. Different from Process 6, incidents in this category did not represent an emotional or cognitive response, but a formed opinion. Incidents in this category expressed both positive (for example, "I like the optimism of solution-focused therapy") and negative opinions (for example, "Adlerian theory does not have anything new to offer"), with no further application of the theory or connection to anything personal.

Process 7: Theory provides solutions- Share a personal problem or issue/ use theory to generate possible solutions. In seven incidents, students cited a current or ongoing concern in their life and used the theory as a means of generating possible courses of action or solutions. In doing so, a majority of students who employed this process were able to come to a different understanding of the possible applications of a theory in promoting change. For example, a student who described a pattern of procrastination applied behavioral techniques to generate strategies for change.

Discussion

The findings from this study both support and challenge the existing literature in several significant ways. Consistent with developmental perspectives on counselor development (e.g. Stoltenberg et al., 1988), the variety of processes employed by students in this sample reflects a range of development, from dichotomous to multiplistic. This range appears to support the first two stages that Watts (1993) proposed as being the aspects of theoretical orientation development that occur during graduate training. Students in this sample are both beginning the

process of self-reflection and are starting to identify the theoretical perspectives with which they identify. The findings of this study also support a post-modern interpretation of theory, in that students used theory as a lens through which to view experiences, and used their experiences as a lens through which to view theory.

Findings from this study raise questions about both of the two leading schools of thought surrounding the process of learning theory and developing theoretical orientation. While modernist approaches are crafted around a didactic presentation of various theories from which students will then choose, the findings from this study highlight the importance of guiding students through a process of reflection, as evidenced by the tendency of some students to accept or discard a theory based on one or a few aspects of the theory. Conversely, constructivist approaches advocating a process of building theoretical orientation from personal experience to developed theory may fail to guide students through the process of recognizing how the lens of experience selectively enhances and/ or reduces what they attend to, as evidenced by the critical incidents that used personal experience or belief to affirm or refute a theory. Thus it would seem that this research supports the use of an integrated constructivist pedagogical method similar to that of Spruill and Benshoff (2000), which includes an introduction to established counseling theories, along with an exploration of values and beliefs to build towards a personal theory.

It struck the authors that current practices for teaching theory could benefit from the inclusion of the principles inherent in learning theories. Ranging from early beliefs that learning is an incremental process of trial and error through active engagement with stimuli (Thorndike, 1923) to more recent perspectives advocating the use of developmentally-guided curricula that "spiral" around the same information at varying points across learning, each time becoming deeper in what is asked of the learner (Bruner, 1977). Learning theories could provide a

framework for deeper exploration of developing theoretical orientation, not only in the theories course but across the counselor education curricula.

The taxonomy resulting from this study can be directly used as a pedagogical and supervisory tool to support students in identifying and reflecting upon their own processes. By providing a framework that normalizes all response patterns, instructors can aid students in exploring their approach to learning and applying theory, highlighting aspects of their own philosophy and worldview (Fear and Wolfe, 1999), and identity development (Auxier et al., 2003). This, in turn, can help to create a foundation for exploring post-modern applications of theory related to self-awareness (Guiffrida, 2005) and social justice (Brubaker et al., 2010).

While the applicability of this study to counseling practice may be less obvious than that to counselor education and supervision, Watts' (1993) proposed model describes an ongoing process of integration and exploration of one's theoretical orientation. Similar to the classroom intervention described above, practicing counselors could use this taxonomy to examine their own statements of why they practice from their chosen theoretical orientation.

Strengths and Limitations

This study is valuable for its focus on the previously unexplored processes students use to apply theory to their personal experiences (and vice versa), and is the first study to date that has sought to elucidate this process. The resulting taxonomy offers a tool that both counselor educators and students can apply in order to illuminate and classify their process. In doing so, students and counselor educators can identify aspects that help or hinder their process of exploring theory and developing theoretical orientation. As Woosley (1986) stated, CIT can be helpful in identifying and classifying turning-point moments, and the application of those classifications to others' process can help promote similar developmental moments.

This study also presents several limitations. Related to participant recruitment this study included only participants within one institution and one theory class instructor, thus limiting the range of theory learning experiences present in the sample. However, the semester-long examination of personal experiences through theory did allow for a sizeable data set that afforded the authors a large number of critical incidents. Additionally, the sample is overwhelmingly Caucasian, and as such may represent a limited range of worldviews. With regards to data collection and analysis, the method used to compile and analyze data did not allow for analysis of developmental growth within individual students or among the group as a whole across the semester. Future research can examine a similar student learning process longitudinally, perhaps employing a time-series design to the examination of critical incidents.

The fact that the second author was also the instructor of the course potentially biased her view of the data, and as such even more expansive efforts towards data triangulation could have strengthened the analysis. This research project used a similar data collection method as previous studies (e.g. Clingerman & Bernard, 2004; Goodrich & Luke, 2010; Ishii, Gilbride & Stensrud, 2009) wherein course documents were later analyzed. However, since the data was originally collected in an evaluative context, this could have influenced the level and nature of the students' disclosures. Additionally, the second researcher's previous connection to the course wherein the data was originally collected may have influenced her perception of the data, hence a coding team was always used.

Conclusion

This study provides a preliminary framework for analyzing the processes employed by students when asked to apply theory to personal experiences. The categories identified illuminate seven different processes. It is clear from the results of this study that acquiring theoretical knowledge alone does not allow for exploration of what one's theoretical preferences say about them, their beliefs, and their blind spots. Alternately, ~~though,~~ when students are able to do so, the use of theory as a frame to examine personal experiences leads to a deeper level of reflection about oneself as well as the identified theory. As such, it seems as though theories courses could benefit from the inclusion of both modern and postmodern pedagogical strategies. The use of the seven processes as means to normalize students' experiences, while also offering a pedagogical and/or supervisory tool, has the potential to broaden students' 'natural' means of responding.

This research makes room for further exploration into this topic. Given the growing use of discourse analysis in counselor education, researchers may wish to explore how students use various discourse markers within each of the identified processes, For example, exploring students' use of the connectives "and" or "but" as discourse markers can serve to either connect two facts or, as is likely the case in the data in this study, a link between a fact and another kind of speech act (e.g. a perlocutionary, or persuasive, act) (Schiffrin, 1987). Additionally, future studies applying these identified processes to a larger or more diverse sample would perhaps allow for a quantitative analysis of qualitative data. The use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with students could access richer data about their experiences.

To examine this process quantitatively, future research might conduct a factor analysis, starting with the factors identified in prior research with counselors including epistemic style and views on feedback (Neimeyer, Prichard, Lyddon & Sherrard, 2001), personality traits (e.g.

Buckman & Barker, 2010; Erickson, 1993; Fredrickson, 1993), cognitive style (Lochner & Melchert, 1997), philosophical assumptions (Buckman & Barker, 2010; Murdock et al., 1998; Norcross & Prochaska, 1983), and interpersonal control (Murdock et al., 1998). Because of the well-documented developmental process of counselor education, future studies into this topic employing a longitudinal design could contribute to this growing body of literature. Lastly, investigations into the processes through which counselor educators and supervisors navigate their own theoretical orientation development would illuminate a different aspect of this process.

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