

# Selecting a Theory of Counseling: What Influences a Counseling Student to Choose?

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**Abstract** The study involved 19 masters-level counseling students in a qualitative research study. A structured interview format was utilized on how counseling students acquire their theoretical counseling orientation. Upon completion of structured interview questions, responses from the participants were formatted into themes and codes. The response themes of the participants included such themes as: 1) counseling theory is similar to my personal value system; 2) the theory makes sense logically; 3) I like the techniques this theory uses, etc. Implications from the study are also discussed.

**Keywords** Theoretical Orientation, Counselor Training, Beginning Counselors

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## 1. Selecting a Theory of Counseling: What Influences a Counseling Student to Choose?

In counseling, “theory is a model that counselors use as a guide to hypothesize about the formation of possible solutions to a problem” [18, p. 194]. Essentially, having a theory of counseling and psychotherapy allows counselors to be effective in their jobs [38] by being able to conceptualize a problem and form a solution [16]. Adherence to counseling theories is part of the professional identity of the counselor [26]. Part of the professional identity of a counselor includes having a comprehensive understanding of a theory in question [16, 32, 45]. There are upwards of nearly 500 theories of counseling in existence [21, 45] that help organize practice experiences and facilitate structure for personal and professional development [40]. The various theories have unique approaches to the practice of counseling but are common in that they are geared towards developing a positive change for the clients in a helping relationship [45]. While expert knowledge in all the theories

is not necessary for counselors to be effective, it is important that counselors familiarize themselves with more than just one theory and be grounded in at least one theoretical orientation [30, 31]. Corey [10] cautions beginning counselors not to be too eager to become eclectic in their theoretical approach until they have mastered some of the basic techniques of psychotherapy. Young [45] agrees that counselors in training need to learn basic counseling skills such as reflecting and listening skills before they are ready to explore the more complex concepts of a theory.

The selection of one theory of counseling over another is a very different experience for most counseling students in training as well as experienced counselors [6]. Theoretical orientation is a developmental process that requires discipline, training and time [38]. According to Halbur & Halbur [22], selecting a theoretical orientation is typically a puzzling experience for students in the helping professions (p.2). Ginter [17] touted the importance of counseling theories when he stated, “Therapy cannot exist without theory” (p. 3). Having a theoretical orientation helps bridge the gap between theory and practice [40]. Having a theoretical orientation also allows beginning counseling students to become confident and competent during their training process allowing them to develop practical interventions and counseling goals [9, 16, 22]. Additionally, it allows a new counselor to learn how to be flexible [9].

Many scholars recommend adopting a theoretical orientation for effective practice [22] but Lazarus, [28] argued that strict adherence to one theoretical orientation is too limiting for the therapist. Lazarus further argued that therapist be versed in multiple theoretical orientations to best fit the needs of clients in what he termed multimodal therapy. Norcross and Goldfried, [32] argued for a more integrative approach to therapy where the therapist incorporates techniques from several therapies in the best effort to assist the client in therapy. Norcross and Goldfried further contend that an integrative approach to therapy must be strategic and that therapists must be versed in many therapeutic orientations.

For a counseling student, selecting a theory of counseling has many benefits. It is an intentional process by which counselors are able to “bridge the gap” between research and practice ([40], p. 84). A counseling student’s sense of professional competence increases when they select a theory early in their training [18]. Many factors can influence a counseling student’s choice of one theory over another [26]. One influence can be the student’s own personal belief system [24]. Another factor that can influence counseling students’ choice is their own personality [e.g. 6, 25]. Other factors observed as an influence in acquisition of theoretical orientation are cognitive style [2], religious beliefs [3, 4] and personal belief systems [14]. As counselor/therapists develop over time, even their interaction with varying personal and professional life events, can cause an evolving of the theoretical orientation over the span of their career [15, 40].

In order to apply a particular theory in counseling, a therapist must have a comprehensive understanding of the theory in question [16, 31]. A graduate-level course on theories of psychotherapy is one obvious place where counseling students first learn about and select a theory of counseling because it provides “scaffolding” for the development of an integrative practitioner ([9], p. 358). Yet, theory selection may not occur until after counseling students finishes their training [39].

The process of selecting a counseling theory is a complex, ever-changing process that is difficult to understand due to sparse and conflicting research findings. For example, some studies have found that a counselor’s self-professed theory is oftentimes different than what they actually practice in therapy [8, 31, 36], while other researchers have found that the counselors do practice what they profess as their theoretical orientation [18]. Research on the connection between personality factors as an influence on theory selection is mixed [15, 44]. Erickson [13] found that there was a connection between counselors’ Myers-Briggs Type Indicator scores and selection of a theoretical orientation. Erickson examined 23 counselors and found that thinking types were more likely to choose cognitive behavioral therapy than other theories of counseling. Similarly, Varlami & Bayne [44] conducted a study with 84 participants using the Keirsey Temperament Sorter II [27] and found that participants who scored sensing-judging type were more likely to choose Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as a theoretical orientation.

Freeman, Hayes, Kuch, & Taub, [15] found no connection between personality type and theoretical orientation. As a result, they concluded that theory selection is a complicated and multifaceted process that cannot be easily understood through the lens of one or two counselor traits. Buckman and Barker [7] conducted a study in the United Kingdom with 142 trained psychotherapists. The results of the Buckman and Barker [7] study were that personality influences were more a result of the training experience from the supervisor/supervisee relationship and not solely from the

counselor in training. Buckman and Barker also found additional influences of counselor’s worldview, and emphasis on training. Additional factors besides counselors’ personality traits, such as personal belief systems have also shown to be an influence in choosing a theory of counseling, their personal belief systems can certainly have an impact [36]. Since studies on theoretical orientation development have varied results, it might be assumed that there is more than one factor influencing counselors’ choice of theory.

A question for researchers and counselor educators alike is whether or not acquisition of theoretical orientation can be measured [23, 34, 35]. Poznanski and McLennan [35] developed a 40-item measure called the Counselor Theoretical Position Scale (CTPS) and found it to be both a reliable and valid measure for evaluating theoretical orientation. Poznanski and McLennan [34] had evaluated 15 instruments that were utilized to evaluate theoretical acquisition. Poznanski and McLennan found that the instruments had 2 themes in common and they were: a) an analytical-experiential component; and b) an objective-subjective dimension. The idea of an analytic component and experiential component was previously proposed by Sundland and Barker [42] based on 3 schools of therapeutic schools of thought (i.e. Freudian, Rogerian, Sullivanians).

While there has been much scientific debate about the value of empirically validated models [45], there have been very few empirical studies examining what might specifically influence a counseling student to choose a particular theory. Hackney [21] asserts that counseling students are influenced by three factors when choosing a particular counseling theory: a) the orientation of the student’s initial training program, b) the student’s own philosophy or life view; and/or c) the student’s therapeutic experience and evolving therapeutic patterns. However, these assertions are largely anecdotal without sound research to support them.

## 2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify key factors that influence the process of theory selection for masters-level counseling students. The intent of the current study is to provide information to counselor educators about the experiences that counseling students identify as being critical in their choosing a theory of counseling. More specifically, the researchers wished to inquire if there were influences on beginning counselors’ choice of theory selection that were outside their own respective personality traits.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Procedure

The following study was a mixed-methods approach.

Mixed methods approaches allow for a greater understanding of a phenomenon that the methods of quantitative or qualitative methods independently don't provide. A mixed-method approach allows for a broader interpretation of the results [11]. The current study employed a qualitative measurement of 7 structured interview questions along with a quantitative 9 question questionnaire (created for the study) consisting of 7 Likert-item responses. The 7 structured interview questions included a yes/no response that also allowed for the participants to elaborate further (see Appendix).

The 9 question questionnaire (quantitative items) consisted of the following items: 1) I like this theory because my personal values align with the theory; 2) I like the theory because it makes logical sense to me; 3) My supervisor or teacher subscribes to the theory; 4) I see the theory as easy to use and practical; 5) The theory seems best for populations I have worked with in the past; 6) To me, the theory is clear and understandable; 7) I like the techniques associated with this theory; 8) I agree with the overall philosophy of the theory; 9) The theory fits with my religious or spiritual beliefs. The time allotted for the interviews was 30-45 minutes.

A demographic information sheet was included in the study. Questions on the demographic sheet included general demographic information (age, ethnicity) as well as questions asking participants if they had prior experience in counseling, what their respective religious affiliation is, counseling track (i.e. mental health, school, marriage and family) and if the participants had already chosen a theoretical orientation and what it was specifically. The participants were purposively selected from 2 sections of masters-level theories of counseling class at a state University in the southern United States. There were a total of 58 students in both sections of the class. A total of 19 students (3 males, 16 females) agreed to participate in the study. Prior to the start of the study, permission was gained from the institutional review board. Each participant was administered an informed consent prior to starting the interview process explaining, risks, benefits, and background of study. Once the students gave permission to participate in the study, arrangements were made to administer the 9 question questionnaire (quantitative items) to the students along with the demographic sheet. The questionnaires were administered to each student who agreed to participate in the study. Participants were instructed to complete the 9 question questionnaire and corresponding demographic sheet and place in supplied envelope.

The researchers administered the questionnaires and demographic sheets together. Participants were asked to complete demographic sheet and questionnaire during break as to not disrupt class and the completion time would be less than 5 minutes. The researchers returned during the class break and collected the questionnaires and demographic sheets in provided envelopes. After the envelopes were collected arrangements were made with each student concerning scheduling times for the structured interviews.

The interviews were conducted by 7 doctoral students trained in conducting structured interviews. The interviews were divided among the 7 doctoral students with each student interviewing 3 participants with one student interviewing an additional participant. This was to ensure that all participants were interviewed. Upon conclusion of the interviews, the written down responses were collected and sealed in envelopes. The researchers double checked the envelopes to ensure that all of the 19 participants had completed interviews.

### 3.2. Participant Characteristics

The participants were all first year counseling students participating in an introduction to counseling theories class. There were 16 females and 3 males that were involved in the study. There were 6 participants in the study who did not report age on the demographic sheet. Of the reported age of the recipients, one reported age of 23, with the oldest reported being 44. The demographic sheets also had 6 participants that did not report their religious affiliation. The missing age demographic and missing religious affiliation did not directly correspond with each other (i.e. participants who did not report age on demographic reported religious affiliation). The ethnicities of the participants were 16 Caucasian, 2 Hispanic, 1 other. The religious affiliation reported by the participants included 9 Christian, 2 Catholic, 1 Agnostic, 1 Jewish, with 6 unreported. Concerning prior experience with counseling, 12 reported they had some experience with 7 reporting no experience. The reported plans (i.e. career aspirations) included 10 private practice, 1 PhD, 1 Licensure, 5 School Counseling and 1 unreported.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Three researchers were involved with the current study. The demographic category of age was removed from the overall demographic characteristics since 6 of the participants in the study did not complete that category on the demographic sheet. The demographic sheet was reviewed along with the recorded responses of the created questionnaire and open-ended questionnaire. Results of the questionnaires were compiled for common codes and themes amongst the participants. Multiple procedures were used in the current study as a means of ensuring validity [12]. Peer reviews [19] were one of the methods utilized to ensure accuracy of results. The validity method of investigator triangulation [1] was incorporated as an additional method of validity check. Different sets of data were collected and reviewed independently by the researchers. Each data set was reviewed by each researcher and then each set was traded to the other researchers until all data was reviewed. After each researcher reviewed and scored each set, the data was also reviewed collectively. The data of the structured interviews were evaluated for themes [20] in order to determine commonality of participant responses.

## 4. Results

The 9 item questionnaire was entered into SPSS 17.0 [41]. The question “I like this theory because my personal values align with the theory” had an average score of 6.0 on the scale with a *SD* of .887. The question “I like the theory because it makes logical sense to me” had an average score of 6.47 with a *SD* of .841. The question “My supervisor or teacher subscribes to the theory” had an average score of 2.47 with a *SD* of 1.498. The question “I see the theory as easy to use and practical” had an average score of 5.68 and a *SD* of 1.003. The question “The theory seems best for populations I have worked with in the past” had an average score of 4.35 and *SD* of 1.998. The question “To me, the theory is clear and understandable” had an average score of 6.28 and *SD* of 1.018. The question “I like the techniques associated with this theory” had an average score of 5.56 and *SD* of 1.688. The question “I agree with the overall philosophy of the theory” had an average score of 5.89 and *SD* of .963. The question “The theory fits with my religious or spiritual beliefs” had an average score of 4.72 and *SD* of 1.994. The content of the open-ended interview questions were broken down into themes [20].

The researchers determined that there were a total of 15 themes based on the open-ended questions: 1) undecided in determining a theoretical orientation; 2) family and friends influenced me; 3) I observed family and friends and derived a principle based on that experience; 4) Extracurricular experiences (conferences, art); 5) Classroom experiences (readings, professor lectures); 6) other classroom experiences; 7) Personal counseling; 8) Work Experiences; 9) Self-Observations (resonates with what I’ve experienced or what I believe); 10) Seeing the theory in action (videos and demonstrations); 11) Liking elements of a particular theory (or theories); 12) Deductive Reasoning; 13) Need more practice or exposure before I choose a theory; 14) My future client population will influence my theory selection; 15) Practical and easy to apply. One of the participants reported on their choice of theory “I don’t think that one class or one textbook has given me enough to make that decision at this moment”. One participant commented on family and friend influence “I have friends who display the birth order in regards to only children and how they react to situations parallels that to Adlerian theory”. Regarding Theme 10 (Seeing the theory in action [videos and demonstrations]), one participant commented “It was nice to see practical application and to see examples. It helped me discover what my strength would be and see how the client responded. That was the strongest indicator for me, getting to see real examples”.

Theme 1 (undecided in determining a theoretical orientation) was consistent with Rønnestad and Skovholt [37] who found that novice counselors are indecisive in selecting a counseling theory and connecting it to practice. Theme 2 and theme 3 (influences of family and friends and observations of families and friends) were similar to the findings of Bitar, Bean, and Bermudez [5] who found that

family of origin had an influence on theoretical orientation. Themes 4, 5 and 6 (which were based on the participants’ current class study) were similar to what Hackney’s [21] contention that the training program is very instrumental in developing a theoretical orientation. Theme 7 (Personal counseling experience) was similar to Bitar, Bean, and Bermudez [5] which indicated an influence of therapy on theoretical orientation. Theme 9 (Self-Observations [resonates with what I’ve experienced or what I believe]) was related to Hansen and Freimuth [23] study who argued that therapists’ worldview is influential in theory selection. Theme 10 (Seeing the theory in action [videos and demonstrations]) which was similar to the findings of the Bitar, Bean, Bermudez, [5] study who found that a demonstration of the theory in question was beneficial when leaning towards a particular theory. Theme 12 (Deductive Reasoning) was related to the Barrio Minton and Myers [2] study where they found a connection between cognitive style and theoretical orientation. It should be noted that theme 12 is indicative of a cognitive process and not specifically to a cognitive style [29]. Theme 13 (Need more practice or exposure before I choose a theory) was similar to the Skovholt and Rønnestad [39] study with a group of 100 participants who were either in their first year of counseling development or had multiple years of experience. Skovholt & Rønnestad [39] found that beginning counseling students in the beginning stages of counselor development are not confident or comfortable in making clinical decisions. Theme 13 was also related to Sundland, and Barker [43] who found that theory selection is closely related to the experience of the therapist.

Theme 15 (Practical and easy to apply) and Theme 11 (Liking elements of a particular theory [or theories]); was similar to Norcross and Prochaska’s [33] study in which they found that therapists had a connection with their theoretical orientation and the techniques of their theory of choice. Theme 14 (My future client population will influence my theory selection) appeared to be unique from any findings in the literature. Theme 8 (Work Experiences) also appeared to be a unique finding from the literature. No themes were evident that indicated that participants’ own personality factors were an influence in selecting a theoretical orientation (e.g. [15]).

## 5. Discussion

For decades, counselor educators have examined the best methods for training counselors in the various aspects of the profession. A central component to this inquiry has been on the counselor trainee’s acquisition of a theoretical orientation from which they will approach their work with clients. Research consistently shows that many beginning counselor students lack an understanding of counseling theory when they are in their initial years of training [37, 39], and due to this common challenge, increased structure is needed when they are learning a theory of counseling and

putting it into practice [9, 41, 45]. Counselor educators need can use their understanding of the processes that contribute to the acquisition of theoretical orientation by new counseling students [e.g. 2, 39, 45] in order to train them more efficiently in these areas. This study identified several key areas that counseling students identified as being most significant in their selection of a theoretical counseling orientation. For example, one study participant identified the connection between theory and practice, as being integral to their development of a theoretical orientation. This connection between theory and practice is an important component of teaching in counselor education, and regarded as a central challenge to early counselor development. Another result in the study supported past research indicating that simply reading about a theory is not sufficient enough to fully understand it. Students need to see and practice examples of the theory in question so they are able to include assimilate the approach in their own personal counseling style [9, 18]. Study participants also highlighted the following as being influential to their acquisition of a theoretical orientation: 1) Counselor educators need to include the particular worldview a theory of counseling presents when teaching theories [14, 23]. 2) The influence of family was a particular focal point for the participants in the study. Counselor educators should incorporate a discussion of family influence when teaching the course [5]. 3) While the profession of counseling has been developing towards a more integrative approach, [32] it is still necessary for counselors to have a thorough knowledge of counseling theories and techniques [16] in order to be effective. 4) The counseling process is developmental in nature [37, 39], and the training process should incorporate multiple methods in order to effectively train counselors [9, 41].

## 6. Implications for Counselor Education

The two themes unique to the current study (Theme 14 and Theme 8) suggest that counseling students are more likely to adopt integrative approaches [32] to therapy and base theoretical orientations on the their own personal work experiences. Findings in the study (Theme 10) suggest that beginning counseling students rely on demonstrated examples of a theories technique [5] as part of the decision making process of choosing a counseling theory.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of the current study was the student sample. Of the 19 students who participated in the study, 16 were Caucasian. The remaining ethnicity reported was Hispanic (2) and Other (1). There were 3 males in the study with the majority of the participants being female. The participants reported religious/spiritual affiliation was 9 Christian, 2 Catholic, and 2 Agnostic with the remainder as 3 unreported and 3 other. The reported religious/spiritual

affiliation was not representative of other religious/spiritual affiliations such as Muslim faith, Hindi, etc. According to Bilgrave and Deluty [3], there is a connection between religious affiliation and choice of therapeutic orientation. Bilgrave and Deluty [4] also made a connection between religious beliefs and found political ideologies are both predictors of theoretical orientation. Another limitation of the study is the results can only be attributed to a group of counseling students and no other psychotherapy disciplines. The participants were also observed during course work of their training and not in their clinical experiences.

## 8. Recommendations for Future Research

While the methodology for the current study was a mixed methods approach intended to gain a greater understanding of just measurement and evaluation of experiences [11] recommendations for future research we would be benefitted for observations made of beginning counselors in clinical settings. Longitudinal studies could also be recommended to examine how students' progress with the development of their theoretical orientation. Studies on the influence of personality on theoretical orientation have been conducted (e.g. [13]), a recommendation for future research would be to look at other influences such as religious affiliation [3, 4] and other factors due to the multifaceted nature of developing a theoretical orientation in counseling [15].

## Appendix

### Open-ended Questions for Theory of Counseling Study

1. At this stage of your counselor development, have you selected a personal theory of counseling? If yes, please describe what it is. If no, are there any theories that you are gravitating toward? If you have no idea what counseling theory you want to choose, please indicate this in your answer.
2. At this stage in your counselor development, have you encountered any materials in a class setting (i.e.: readings, lecture) that resonated with you, and as a result, helped you select your chosen theory of counseling? If yes, please describe.
3. At this stage in your counselor development, have you encountered any "Aha" moments (moments of clarity or "epiphanies") in the program (or in life) that played a role in helping you choose your theory of counseling? If yes, please describe.
4. Have you had any job experiences that have influenced your selection of your chosen counseling theory?
5. Have you had any experiences with your friends and/or family members that have influenced your selection of a counseling theory? If yes, please explain.
6. Have you ever seen a counseling demonstration that

influenced your selection of a counseling theory? If yes, please describe.

7. If you have not been able to select a counseling theory yet, please write a few sentences about what might help you to choose a counseling theory.

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