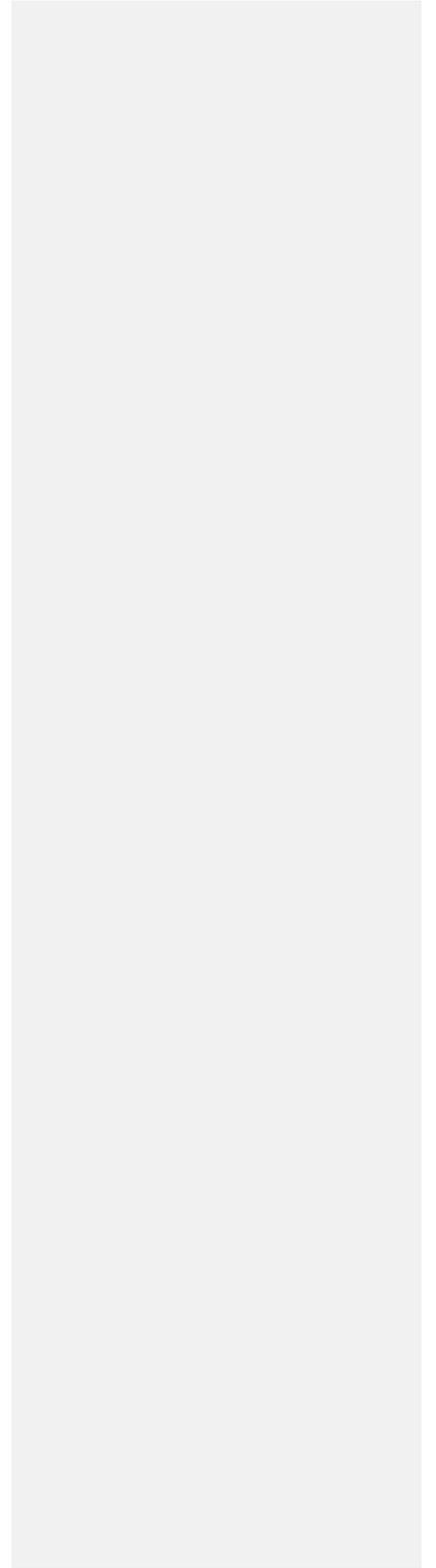


Creating an Integrative Theoretical Approach to Counseling



The University of Tennessee at Martin



### Creating an Integrative Theoretical Approach to Counseling

Mental health practitioners have debated since the time of Freud over which theoretical orientation can best bring about personality change, and for decades, therapists remained unconditionally devoted to their chosen theoretical school (Corey, 2008). However, today's practitioners are more open to "integrating the best ideas from the various schools rather than searching for the best theory" (Corey, 2008; p. 448). Psychotherapy integration seeks to improve the effectiveness and validity of counseling as the supporters of this approach reason that no single theory can meet the needs of a diverse client population with a wide range of problems and life circumstances (Corey, 2008). Counselors should be open to an integrative approach to counseling and attempt to incorporate several theories and a number of techniques into their practice, which will allow them to work effectively with clients on all three levels of human experience: feeling, thinking, behaving.

For me, the idea of integrating several techniques and theories into my counseling practice seems very logical, and I naturally gravitate toward existential, cognitive-behavior, and feminist therapies. I feel that these theories and associated methods provide a solid foundation from which I can address a diverse client population with a variety of issues.

#### *Basic Philosophy*

My basic philosophy of counseling is that therapists should help clients develop healthy coping skills in an empathic and supportive environment so that they can handle life's stresses in a productive way. Additionally, as a counselor, I want to help my clients discover that they are not victims in their lives but that they have choices, which can empower them to create meaning and purpose in their lives. However, I certainly acknowledge that not everyone has equal opportunities to make the choices they would like, due to their culture or environmental life

circumstances. When working with clients, I will be cognizant of their unique life circumstances and counsel them in ways that are compatible with their worldviews. Additionally, I will encourage clients to take responsibility for their lives while providing them some structure and direction from which to begin. I think many people know that something is wrong in their lives (i.e., they don't feel the way they want to feel), yet they don't know how to begin to make positive changes. A number of people may be caught in negative self-fulfilling prophecies or faulty thinking and do not know how to break patterns that lead to unconstructive emotions and behaviors. This is where I think a counselor can come in and act as a partner, guide, and teacher for clients and help them address concerns, express feelings, formulate goals, and develop action plans that will allow them to live more satisfying lives. I feel that the integration of existential, cognitive-behavior, and feminist therapies give me a diverse theoretical base from which to counsel clients. These approaches also allow me to incorporate effective therapeutic techniques that fit my personality and overall counseling philosophy.

### *Key Concepts*

In working from an integrative perspective, I will incorporate the key concepts from several counseling theories. First, the existential theory underscores basic dimensions of the human condition, including "(1) the capacity for self-awareness; (2) freedom and responsibility; (3) creating one's identity and establishing meaningful relationships; (4) the search for meaning, purpose, values, and goals; (5) anxiety as a condition of living; and (6) awareness of death and non-being" (Corey, 2008; p. 139). Existential therapy aims to strike a healthy balance between recognizing our limitations yet emphasizing our possibilities in life. This approach stresses self-awareness before taking action to change one's life (Corey, 2008). You have to become aware of yourself to know which path you want to take. Corey (2008) says that self-awareness "includes

**Comment [h1]:** I like how you presented these ideas. It's very logical and clear. But I'm wondering, why do you think these things?? Can you think of a professional or personal experience that might have lent credence to these ideas for you?

awareness of alternatives, motivations, factors influencing the person, and personal goals...” (p. 140). Cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) acknowledges that “psychological problems may be rooted in childhood... and reinforced by present ways of thinking” (Corey, 2008; p. 457). I would integrate this concept to balance the present and future orientation of the existential approach in my counseling practice. Utilizing the key concepts from CBT will allow me to address clients’ past experiences and thought patterns and tackle client issues resulting from faulty internal dialogues. Also, using the concepts of feminist therapy in my practice will keep me aware of how “environmental conditions contribute to the problems of women and men and how gender-role socialization leads to a lack of gender equality” (Corey, 2008; p. 5). Using feminist principles further supports my efforts to have a multicultural counseling approach that values diverse client populations.

I will likely work in private practice at some point in a suburb of Nashville. Most counseling clients in my area are middle-class, White women and couples. I will also serve a diverse client population through pro bono work at a community center in downtown Nashville. It will be important for me to have a range of theories and techniques from which to use because I will be serving, in total, many different types of clients. I feel that my choice to use existential, cognitive-behavior, and feminist theories allows me to effectively serve individuals, couples, and groups with a variety of backgrounds and life circumstances. Existential therapy allows me to address meaning of life issues and gives me the freedom to utilize CBT techniques to provide structure and direction in my counseling sessions with clients who are functioning at a reasonable level but who are having a developmental crisis or difficulties with a transition in life. Feminist therapy and use of CBT techniques will allow me to serve clients who face inequality in their lives from many sources.

**Comment [h2]:** Excellent justification for your choices. But...are there any personal reasons for choosing these theories? How do they fit you?

*Goals of Therapy*

The ultimate goal of my counseling practice is to help clients realize that they are worthy beings; help them combat faulty thinking and gain healthy coping skills; and to empower them to make positive choices in their lives by claiming their personal power, thereby benefitting themselves and society at-large. This integrative approach to therapy incorporates the existential, cognitive-behavioral, and feminist therapies, respectively, and makes for a well-rounded practice that can serve a variety of clients. For example, these goals could apply to a White, middle-class couple that was having marital problems after having children and going through role changes in their lives. The feminist therapy principles could serve this couple by focusing on equality in the relationship or bringing to light the limitations placed on the wife because of traditional gender stereotypes. The existential approach could serve this same couple if one or both individuals were having a transition-in-life crisis due to becoming parents. Also, this integrative approach could serve male or female clients from a minority culture as the feminist principles address issues of inequality in gender-role socialization or institutional oppression (Corey, 2008). Additionally, feminist therapy could be applied to any situation where the client feels marginalized due to race, gender, religion, culture, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Finally, the goals of CBT would work with both existential and feminist therapies, which would allow me to challenge and change faulty belief patterns with clients, no matter if they are struggling with feelings of inequality or not.

*Role of the Therapist*

I see my role as a counselor as a partner, guide, and teacher who will help clients address concerns, express feelings, formulate goals, and develop action plans that will allow them to live more satisfying lives. My role will vary according to the characteristics of each client, and I will

approach each client with empathy, compassion, support, and understanding. A large part of the beginning stages of counseling will be building trust with my clients, and I will be engaging and open in counseling sessions. I will self-disclose appropriate information when I think it will help enhance the therapeutic relationship. I will expect the client to take an active role in determining the goals of therapy and the content of the therapy sessions. As the counselor, I will provide more structure during initial counseling sessions as I am gathering information and assessing client needs. As the therapeutic relationship develops during initial sessions, I will shift increasing amounts of responsibility to clients in order to make them more in control of the direction of their counseling experience. Empowerment will be a large part of my counseling practice, and I want to teach clients how to manage their issues in sessions but, most importantly, how to handle conflicts in real-life situations. My role as an “expert” will be used sparingly in order to provide needed direction to clients until they have the skills to take responsibility for the course of therapy. As clients progress, they will need less and less guidance and direction from me.

#### *The Therapeutic Relationship*

I see the therapeutic relationship with my clients as the most important part of the therapeutic process. I identify most with the existential and person-centered view of the client-counselor relationship, which emphasizes viewing the world through the clients’ eyes and establishing a personal and authentic relationship with the client by expressing genuineness, warmth, respect, and caring in an environment of support, empathy, and non-judgment (Corey, 2008). The existential approach additionally stresses the immediacy of the client-therapist relationship, which can be especially helpful with clients in short-term therapy. I will also practice the egalitarian and empowerment principles of feminist therapy in my interactions with

**Comment [h3]:** I am very impressed at the depth of your thinking here. I have the sense that you are a very good clinician.

clients and will additionally “strive to create a collaborative relationship in which clients can become their own expert” (Corey, 2008; p. 465). As I work with clients, I will strive to understand how they view the world so that I may better serve them. I will constantly re-evaluate my values and beliefs so that I can remain objective. I will practice accurate empathy and good self-care in order to be effective in sessions and maintain vitality for the clients I serve.

#### *Central Techniques and Methods*

It is impossible to fully discuss the wide range of techniques and methods I will incorporate into my therapeutic practice within the scope of this paper. However, I think Corey (2008) sums up my thoughts on this nicely when he says that choosing techniques and methods “depends on the purpose of therapy, the setting, the personality and style of the therapist, the qualities of the particular client, and the problems selected for intervention” (p. 465). Working from the foundation of the existential, cognitive-behavior, and feminist theories, I will have a very flexible and diverse repertoire of techniques and methods from which to choose.

The existential framework does not prescribe techniques per se but allows counselors to choose techniques from other approaches and incorporate them into issues that are explored, such as “freedom and responsibility, isolation and relationships, meaning and meaninglessness, and living and dying” (Corey, 2008; p. 466). I will couple this open-ended view of techniques with more structure and direction borrowed from the cognitive-behavior school of thought. Using CBT techniques, I will customize interventions for each client to address issues from cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perspectives. Some of the CBT techniques I will use include debating irrational beliefs, homework assignments, forming alternative interpretations, learning new coping skills, role playing, changing internal language and thinking patterns, confronting faulty beliefs, and imagery (Corey, 2008). From the feminist perspective, I will

utilize consciousness-raising techniques, which help clients realize the influence of society in their lives. Some of these techniques will include gender-role analysis and intervention, demystifying therapy, assertiveness training, bibliotherapy, reframing and relabeling, journal writing, group work, and social action (Corey, 2008).

The goal of choosing from a variety of techniques is to be able to help clients think about their values and beliefs, express their feelings about issues and problems in their lives, and to empower them to choose positive ways of behaving that will enhance their lives. It will be critical that I customize each therapeutic intervention according to each client's life situation, personality, cultural background, and spiritual or religious beliefs (or lack thereof).

#### *Applications of the Approaches*

Many of the clients I will see in my day-to-day private practice counseling sessions will be well-suited for the existential therapy approach to counseling. This approach can be personalized to address a variety of concerns with a diverse clientele, but it is especially suited to confront issues with transitions in life, developmental crises, or "meaning of life" concerns. Existential therapy can be used to tackle conventional issues, such as "making choices, dealing with freedom and responsibility, coping with guilt and anxiety, making sense of life, and finding values" (Corey, 2008; p. 468). Additionally, this approach can be utilized with clients seeking personal enrichment. It can be employed in a number of therapeutic settings, such as individual counseling; group, couples, and family therapy; community mental health counseling; and crisis intervention (Corey, 2008).

The majority of clients I will likely see in my suburban Nashville practice are White, middle-class women and heterosexual couples. However, I also want to work with a more

**Comment [h4]:** This last paragraph is a very good explanation for the techniques you listed.

diverse clientele at a large counseling center in downtown Nashville. I will talk about these two settings and how I will use an integrative approach to counseling in both environments.

The integrative theoretical approach I have created gives me a great deal of flexibility and options to work with a variety of client populations with diverse issues. In private practice, I will likely utilize the existential approach to counseling as a basis for most of my sessions and make use of techniques from cognitive-behavior therapy with many clients. Many counseling sessions at a large counseling practice for which I have volunteered are scheduled for White, middle-class women in individual appointments and heterosexual married persons in couples' therapy. This is the counseling center where I will likely work. Most clients are functioning well and are having issues with interpersonal relationships, problems adjusting to transitions in life/changing roles in life (becoming a spouse, parent, reaching middle age, etc.), and the usual resulting expressions of life dissatisfaction—depression and anxiety.

For example, using the existential approach with individual female clients who are married with children, I will work to identify with each woman's view of her world and develop an authentic and collaborative therapeutic relationship with each. Many clients at the private practice in this example are married women who are stay-at-home mothers and struggle with gender-role stereotypes and identity issues. Many of these women were at one time independent, working women who made a decision to quit working and stay home full-time to raise children. With these clients, I will work to understand their feelings of confusion and resentment as they struggle with their changing identities and sense of loss of self and meaning in their lives. I would spend time building trust in the therapeutic relationship and allow these clients to express their feelings about their current situation and information about their beliefs, values, spiritual views, and backgrounds. In the role of therapist, I would act as a therapeutic partner, guide, and

teacher to the extent that the client needs these supports. I would encourage the client to take responsibility for the goals and content of therapy sessions but provide as much structure as necessary to assure that therapy progresses and the client learns new and productive ways of coping, feeling, thinking, and behaving. Existential theory would be used to explore meaning of life issues and the search for purpose and direction in life. These women may be feeling stagnant in their lives, which is a common issue explored in the existential framework. Anxiety as a condition of living should be explored, and I will investigate the notion with these clients that the significance of our existence is never fixed but is constantly being re-created through the projects we undertake. Two of my major tasks with these clients will be to “invite clients to recognize how they have allowed others to decide for them and encourage them to take steps toward choosing for themselves” (Corey, 2008; p. 142). Each client intervention must be unique to the needs of the client, but as a counselor, I will invite my clients to explore the options that fit their lives and encourage them to live authentically in spite of the pressures that they face in their lives (Corey, 2008). In addition, I will address any issues surrounding gender-role socialization using the feminist therapy concepts and use this approach to empower clients to recognize, claim, and use their personal power to overcome limitations that they have placed on themselves or that others have placed on them. Furthermore, I will make use of feminist therapy techniques (when appropriate) and use cognitive-behavior techniques to assist these clients in addressing and changing faulty thinking and decision-making patterns. For example, for a female client who has come to me with dissatisfaction in her role as a wife and mother but who wants to work full-time again, I would encourage her to engage in a role playing exercise with me. I could play the role of her husband, and she could rehearse a conversation she might have with him about her desire to change her conventional role as a stay-at-home mother and return to work. I also think

assigning homework assignments, such as keeping a written journal, with clients will be very important so that clients develop a sense of confidence and independence as they apply information gathered in therapy to their everyday lives and use this work done outside of therapy to make counseling sessions more efficient.

### *Summary*

Developing an integrated approach to counseling is a challenge for any therapist. No one theoretical framework addresses every aspect of counseling, so counselors must strive to create a comprehensive approach that meets client needs, feels natural to the therapist, and can be used with a variety of client populations and issues. In my counseling practice, I will integrate existential, cognitive-behavior, and feminist theories and techniques in order to best serve a wide range of clients and issues. Cognitive-behavior techniques will allow me to use methods that have been empirically tested and have proven to be effective. I will balance the action-oriented, directive techniques of CBT with the existential approach, which will provide opportunities for my clients to explore their thoughts and feelings about the meaning of life according to them and choices in their lives. The existential approach also allows spiritual or religious considerations to be discussed within the framework of therapy and worked on as an issue or used to help clients make sense of the world and provide a method of coping. Lastly, I will use feminist therapy principles and methods to address issues of inequality that my clients may have and provide more support to diverse client populations in my counseling practice. My ultimate goal as a counselor is to help clients overcome obstacles and make choices to create the lives they want. Of course each client's ability to choose must be considered in the contexts that may limit them, but it is my goal to teach clients ways of coping with internal and external stresses and empower them to exercise increasing freedom to make positive choices in their lives.

**Comment [h5]:** This was a great description of how your personal orientation to counseling will translate into working with real clients.