

CHAPTER 1

A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION TO THEORY

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2 ● THEORIES OF COUNSELING AND THERAPY

It may seem like theories arise solely from academic and intellectual sources, but there are actually a number of very personal motives that lead practitioners of any profession to select and develop the theoretical constructs that guide their work. Albert Ellis, for example, developed his unique form of cognitive therapy because of his attraction to logic and more direct confrontation. Carl Rogers spent much of his life searching for deep understanding in relationships and so evolved a style of therapy that was compatible with this journey. Karen Horney explored how parental indifference toward a child sets up the development of neurosis after trying for years to win the love of her father, who, as a ship captain, was frequently absent. Likewise, many of the other theorists developed models that best reflected their unique personalities, interpersonal styles, beliefs, values, and preferences.

Before we begin this journey together, we would like to introduce ourselves. Sharing stories and experiences is a good way to learn and one that we will encourage throughout this book. It will also give you some clues to how we see the world, which of course has influenced our perspectives on the theories included in this book. So we will begin by taking turns telling you about the relationships each of us has developed with theory over the years. Then we will encourage you to do the same with each other.

● EVOLVING THEORETICAL JOURNEYS

Jeffrey's Story

Throughout my training as a counselor and therapist, theory was the scourge of my life. I wanted to help people. I wanted to learn practical stuff that I could use immediately to make a difference in others' lives. Just as importantly, I hoped that much of what I was learning I could use to improve my personal relationships. I had visions that once I became proficient in the basic skills, I could get people to like me more, understand better why people act the ways they do, and be more effective in my daily interactions.

Although theory could be useful in reaching these goals, I was impatient; often I could not see a clear connection between what I was learning in school and what I was expected to do in my work and in my life. When reading class assignments, I often found it difficult to concentrate on the words. All the names seemed to run together. And I could not figure out the point of learning so many different theories when they all seemed to contradict one another.

I was a very impressionable student, eager to learn as much as I could and motivated to impress my teachers. Each instructor would present a particular theory that he or she believed was The Answer. Research would be supplied to support the particular choice. Case examples of miracle cures further impressed me with how superior this theory was to all others. In no time, I was convinced that I had finally found The Truth.

My moment of revelation would last about as long as it took to arrive at my next class in which the instructor would be equally persuasive. An alternative theory would be presented that directly refuted the premises of the previous one. Naturally, I would resist attempts to convert me to the enemy camp, but I soon found myself a True Believer of another theory.

I will not bore you with the lengthy journey I have traveled down the road to theory enlightenment. When you consider that there are literally hundreds of distinctly different theories that have been catalogued, you can appreciate just how long it would take to sample all of them. Even if you narrow the choices to the dozen most popular approaches, you would still need a few lifetimes to do them justice.

I am not exaggerating when I say that, at one time or another, I have followed the tenets of at least a dozen or more of the theories contained in this book. I loved them all! And I found they all worked most of the time. I have also found amusement when I read reviews of my other books in which I am variously labeled as a cognitive, humanistic, psychodynamic, existential, or integrative therapist, as if my chameleon-like nature is hard to pin down. I think my clients would say basically the same thing if they compared notes since I do very different things in each session depending on what is required and what will work best with a given client.

You might wonder, if a theory was so helpful to me and my clients, why on earth would I have ever abandoned it in favor of another? You could chalk it up to my fickle nature, my desire for novelty, or my need for approval from supervisors, but I would prefer to think I was always searching for a better, more efficient, more powerful means by which to promote lasting change in those I was assigned to help.

Marilyn's Story

In some ways, Jeffrey and I are like two sides of a coin—and this is one of them. Rather than being the scourge of my life, theories, and theory per se, intrigue me.

I had a meandering career as a clerk in a tire factory, a secondary teacher, a private music teacher, and a freelance writer before I went to graduate school and officially got into the business of research, writing, and higher

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education. During that early time, “theory” and all things related to it were usually referred to by my acquaintances in terms of gentle derision; references to “theory” were usually paired with an image of someone so lost in abstract ideas that they would forget to tie their shoes or bore other people to death when they talked. My own understanding of theory came on slowly—and later.

As a young adult, I lived in a small rural town for a number of years. There was not much to do, and no work in my field, so I started reading every book in the library (which was not hard!) on development and human meaning. I had lots of questions—What makes a good life? What is “normal”? How do people turn out the way they do? Can they change? What, in the range of human potentials, is noble and worth aspiring to? Is that potential there for all? What does experience and life circumstance have to do with it?

I overwhelmed myself pretty fast because I found out that there were as many different answers to these questions as there were books in the library. But then I realized that many different views could be grouped together in their similarities, and that made it a little easier. I started to see that assumptions or “big ideas” lay under each writer’s propositions, like “humans are basically good” versus “humans are neither bad nor good; their experiences make them what they are.” Then I could think about whether I agreed or disagreed with that—which allowed me to gradually narrow down what I really wanted to learn more about, and from whom. Thus, theory was a thread that I could follow through the dense and sometimes scary Forest of Contradictory Ideas. Now, I find theory to be both an exciting and comforting thing. A theory gives you a structure from which to tell a story. It helps you notice important things and leave other things in the background. It highlights how things are connected—which is more tasteful to me than gazing at chaos. I tend to like “grand theories” that explain a whole lot, probably because I also like epic movies and novels with a broad sweep of history, characters, and history-changing events. And I love how, in the end, you can see all the connections.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR CLASS ACTIVITY

Either in a journal or with a small group of peers, talk about the reactions you have to the authors’ confessions. How do they compare with what you have experienced thus far in your life and in your training? Talk about your own journey toward theory development, including your major points of confusion and frustration.

SO MANY CHOICES, SO LITTLE TIME ●

Jeffrey's Story

I started with psychoanalytic theory because that was the approach taken by the first therapist I saw while I was a college student. I had been heartbroken by a girlfriend, so depressed I could barely get out of bed. I visited the counseling center on campus in a last, desperate effort to prevent myself from dropping out of school. The therapist was so understanding, so responsive—the mother I had always wanted. We spent a lot of time talking about my childhood and how those experiences shaped the problems I was encountering in the present. After reading the collected works of Freud and many of his disciples, I decided to follow in the footsteps of my therapist and become a psychoanalytic therapist.

My first job as a crisis intervention counselor was quite at odds with the theory to which I had decided to devote my life. Here I was in a situation trying to help people who were overdosing on drugs or trying to kill themselves. Even if I could get them to pay attention for more than a minute at a time, they had very little interest in their dreams, unconscious, or repressed impulses; all they wanted was a little relief from their suffering—and they wanted it immediately.

I became a behaviorist within days of starting my job. I usually had only one session, or maybe two—sometimes just a brief phone call—in which to offer help. I learned rather quickly to program specific treatment goals, identify effective reinforcers, and help people to set up some kind of self-management program to deal with their problems. Then I would refer them to a support group.

I read everything I could get my hands on about behavioral theory. I loved its specificity and concreteness. I felt so grateful for the structure that it offered, especially for a beginner like me who was trying to make sense of this mysterious process that everyone explained so differently. Moreover, I liked the way I could define specific goals and then measure the extent to which my efforts were helpful.

When I began graduate school, my adviser was a rational emotive therapist, so that is what I became next. I desperately wanted his approval, and because he believed that behavioral theory was so limited, I could not help but agree with him. Once he demonstrated the theory in action by helping me to work through a longstanding family problem in a single hour, I was truly blown away. I went to workshops on cognitive approaches and did my best to become an expert, even volunteering to be a client on stage during

demonstrations. Just as convincing was how effective the approach seemed to be with the clients I was beginning to see as part of my training.

If we had more time together, I could elaborate further about how many theories I have followed during my career. From rational emotive theory, I adopted the client-centered approach and then Gestalt therapy and existential therapy. I loved each of them—loved them all!

In later years as I progressed through a master's and doctoral program and worked in a dozen different jobs, I became a full-fledged, card-carrying, transpersonal, strategic, and constructivist practitioner. I have attended workshops on a dozen other conceptual approaches, finding all of them useful with my clients.

Marilyn's Story

As I mentioned before, I like epic movies and novels (such as *War and Peace* and *Gone With the Wind*); this has been true since I was a teenager. So I have always liked grand theories and would be happy if someday those following in Einstein's footsteps do indeed come up with a theory of everything.

While I began building upon my previous careers in order to become a counselor, I was also caring for my own young children. Their development—and their similarities and differences—fascinated me, so developmental theories were my first love. I found Erikson's life span development theory to make a lot of sense, as I watched my children grow; Bowenian family systems ideas did too, as I saw how all the individuals in my family affected each other across generations. I did a lot of parent education training (this naturally followed from trying to do a better job with my own three children!), and this led me into Adlerian theory. I followed the roots of all three of these theories back to psychodynamic theories, where I found explanations for why people are who they are and do what they do.

In addition to having a taste for sweeping grandness, I am also pragmatic and I like simple, elegant solutions to problems when they can be found. In graduate school, I found myself hanging around the family therapy training clinic where there was a strong emphasis on brief approaches; I began experimenting with those and got good results. Lately, while working with teenage girls who are using alcohol and other drugs, I have become intrigued with approaches that increase motivations for behavioral change, because these methods can often make a big difference fast and can be so empowering. Living in the midst of tremendous diversity, relational cultural theory gives me an aspirational roadmap for how I want my close relationships, classes, workgroups, and city to be. And lately I have been thinking a lot about the heart of the matter, of life and of this profession, which leads me to a deeper

appreciation for the existential and humanistic theories that prize deep and genuine contact with self and others. While this probably sounds “hodge-podge,” it all comes together into a good working base that feels like “me.”

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

You must already have some hunches about the kinds of theories, or explanations, you tend to like. You may already be very familiar with some. In conversation with classmates, share what you already know about and what would make a theory personally appealing to you.

We are both now rather integrative therapists as far as theory goes, but earlier there were points where confusion settled in. You will probably feel the same as you read this book and take in one good theory after another. All of these theories seem so different, yet they all seem to work well. How can this possibly be true? To make matters worse, at times all the theories sound the same—it is hard to keep them separate and remember where one ends and the other begins.

Like most experienced practitioners, we have tried to integrate the best features of each theory we studied. We have each borrowed a little here, changed a few ideas there, and combined the parts we liked most into frameworks that seemed to work best with our personality and style, as well as with our clients. Since beginning this synthesis many years ago, we are still making refinements in our personal, “working” theories in light of new ideas that emerge, new research that is published, and new experiences we accumulate with our clients. In Jeffrey’s case, the changes have been so vast that clients he saw 10 years ago might not recognize his work today! In Marilyn’s case, there is a recognizable thread that runs through her work with clients, but her thinking about how and why her techniques work has evolved substantially. Rather than apologizing for this evolution, we are proud and delighted and challenged by the ever-changing nature of this profession. You will be too—once you overcome some of your confusion, uncertainty, doubts, and fears.

FOR A FIELD STUDY

Approach several practitioners who are doing what you hope to do someday. Ask them about the evolution of their conceptual development. Rather than keeping the conversation solely on an intellectual level, as if their theories were selected purely based on logical choices, inquire about the personal motives and factors that influenced their development. Find out what critical incidents shaped their ideas about how therapy works best.

● HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS CLASS AND TEXT

The main challenge of this course is that there is so much material to learn and so little time in which to learn it. Furthermore, you will be learning theories not only to understand their roots, to pass an exam, or to write a paper but also to *apply* them effectively. Very soon you will be sitting opposite people who look to you for relief from their pain. They want you to explain what is wrong with them. They expect you to make their problems go away. They demand to know what you are going to do and how you are going to do it. And you had better have some answers—not only in addressing their concerns but also in delivering what you promise. Unless you have mastered a theory to make sense of what is happening and organize your interventions, not only won't you help people but you can actually make things a lot worse.

We will do our best to “sell” each of the theories in this text. We will be as persuasive as we can to convince you why a theory is so wonderful, how much it offers, and all the neat stuff it provides in the way of guidance. Then, in the very next chapter, we will present *another* theory that sounds just as good. Then another, and another.

Our recommendation is to treat each of the theories as valuable and important. Assume that every prominent approach is popular because many experienced professionals have found it effective. Know that current research has failed to support the superiority of any one of these theories over all the rest (although some are better than others for some situations and issues). That is not to say that you will *like* each of them; on the contrary, some will immediately attract you, and others will strike you as silly or irrelevant or not at all representative of your experience. That is very good news actually because it will make your job so much easier in narrowing down the options to those that fit best with your interests, specialty, personality, and desired job setting.

As you read this text, we invite you to consider the following advice about approaching this subject:

1. *Think critically about what you read.* Don't take our word for what is presented. Compare the ideas to your own experience. But don't argue with us or your instructor; argue with yourself.
2. *Notice what you resonate with and what you don't.* Pay attention to your gut-level feelings as you learn about a theory or see it in action. These feelings are related to your core beliefs and assumptions about life, which deserve honor.

3. *Talk about the concepts with family members and friends.* Take it home with you. Don't just compartmentalize what you are learning; if you do, you may end up leaving loved ones behind.
4. *Keep up with your reading.* This is not the sort of course in which you can wait until the last minute to prepare for a test or assignment.
5. *Form a study group with classmates.* It is important for you to find and create opportunities to talk about what you are learning and to apply ideas to your work and life.
6. *Do the exercises and activities.* Throughout the text, there are numerous "time-outs" for reflection, field studies, class activities, and homework assignments. If your goal is to make this stuff part of you, you must make an effort to personalize the concepts.
7. *Manage your frustration and stress levels.* There is far too much content in this book for any one human being to master in a lifetime, much less in a single semester. Be patient and realistic with yourself about what you can do.
8. *Understand that you have the rest of your career to study a few of these theories in depth.* For now, your job is to get the basics down so that you have a working background in which to apply one or two theories with reasonable effectiveness.
9. *Make learning an active process.* Take responsibility for applying what you read and do in class to your daily life.

One of the consequences of training to be a therapist is that you will change fairly dramatically. In this theory course alone, you will be exposed to many new ideas that will reshape the way you look at the world and yourself. In addition, therapist preparation places great emphasis on developing greater intimacy in relationships, being more honest and direct, and using a variety of interpersonal skills to communicate more powerfully and persuasively. If you don't think this will change all your relationships, you aren't paying attention.

If you are not already doing so, it would be an excellent idea to invite your closest friends and family members to become involved in your education. Talk to them about what you are learning. Recruit their help with assignments in which you need to practice new skills. Introduce them to some of your classmates and instructors. If they show an interest, invite them to read some of your texts and especially your own papers and projects. Most of all, talk to them about what you are experiencing and the changes you are making.

A significant number of students find that their primary relationships and friendships become strained or even end as a result of the changes they go through during training. If you begin experiencing troubles in this regard that you can't work through on your own, consult with a counselor or therapist for help. This is perhaps the single best thing you can do to truly experience the power of therapy in action.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

You may have glossed over one of the pieces of advice we offered to you. In Item 3, we mentioned that it is a good idea to get your family, friends, and loved ones involved in your educational experience. We warned you that if you don't do this, you risk leaving them behind. Why and how might this be particularly important for you?

● WHAT IS AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH?

This text takes a very personal approach to the subject of theory. We favor this method not only because it makes learning fun but also because active involvement is required in order to help the ideas stick with you over time. After all, you won't do your clients much good if sometime in the future you have only the vaguest possible notion about how to make sound clinical decisions. You might not remember all the names of things, but you must have instant recall of the principles that guide your professional behavior.

This sort of experiential approach is consistent with what is known about how human learning takes place. Real change occurs not only on an intellectual level but also involves a person's whole being. This is the case with not only how you do counseling and therapy but also how you learn to do it.

In order for you to become thoroughly familiar with the major theoretical structures that guide therapeutic action, you will need to study the material so that it becomes personally meaningful to you. First, as you are well aware, you tend to remember those ideas that seem most relevant as well as those that you can use daily. Second, you will need to understand the theories to the point that you can talk about them intelligently to colleagues, explain them to clients, and combine the best features of divergent approaches into a coherent framework to guide your actions.

An experiential approach to this subject means that you must have direct and intimate connections with the content, not as something that is "out there" but as something that is part of you. It is not enough to *know* the

ideas; you must use them in your daily functioning. The theories become integrated into the routine and normal ways that you relate to the world.

How does this transformation occur that transcends mere superficial learning such as memorization or recall? Deep learning takes place through direct experience in which you become actively involved in the process. You can't learn this stuff merely by reading about it or by sitting still in a seat while an instructor—no matter how entertaining and interesting—tells you about it. Seeing demonstrations of the theories in action and watching videos of master practitioners are also extremely useful in making the ideas come alive, but this still doesn't engage you actively to personalize what you are learning.

FOR A CLASS ACTIVITY

Talk to one another about the ways that have been most effective for learning new, complex ideas. Think about one specific instance in which you felt particularly successful in this regard and provide examples of what helped you the most to retain the learning.

As a counterpoint, talk about times that you learned things to pass an exam or get through a series of obstacles, but the results were not enduring. Compare the two experiences and come to your own conclusions about what matters most.

In order for you to hold onto this content for the rest of your life, you must integrate the new material with what you already know. Then you have to figure out ways to combine the material with reality-based practice. The theories that will be most enduring in your work will be those that fit with your experience. They explain things that make sense to you. They predict behavior accurately. They are congruent with the ways you view the world. Finally, such theories are useful to you in making good decisions about how to do your job most effectively.

To aid you with this challenging mission, each chapter contains a number of experientially based activities, assignments, and reflective exercises that are designed to help you not only remember the theories but also apply them where they can help the most. We can't stress how important it is that you complete these assignments so that the active process of learning continues even when you aren't studying the text.

To help you begin the difficult job of organizing the material you read and linking related concepts from different approaches, this text treats various theories in broad categories. Throughout your exposure to each individual approach, you will also begin looking at how it is similar to and different from others.

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We will do our best to maintain your interest by including lots of stories, case examples, practical applications, and humor. It will be your job to relate what you learn to what you already know, what you are doing in your life, and what you hope to do in the future.

REMINDERS OF HOW TO STUDY THEORY

1. Read consistently and steadily throughout the semester.
2. Think critically about what you read, and pay attention to how you resonate with it, too.
3. Talk about the concepts with family members and friends.
4. Form a study group with classmates to talk about the ideas.
5. Complete the exercises and activities.
6. Manage your frustration and stress levels so that you remain patient and realistic about what can be done.
7. Get the basics down and then focus on a few theories that appeal most to you.
8. Take responsibility for applying what you read and do in class to your daily life.

● SUGGESTED READINGS

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