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## Selecting a Theoretical Orientation: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study with Counselors-in-Training

Dayna M. Watson

*University of Alabama at Birmingham, watsondm@uab.edu*

John Super

*University of Central Florida, jsuper@ucf.edu*

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## Selecting a Theoretical Orientation: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study with Counselors-in-Training

### Keywords

theory, theoretical orientation, counselor education, counselors-in-training, grounded theory

### Author's Notes

Choosing a theoretical orientation is a challenging, but essential part of counselor training (Corey, 2016). While some factors contributing to counselors-in-training (CITs) choice of theory have been explored, little is known about the process by which CITs determine their own theoretical orientation. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, authors found that CITs went through two parallel processes to determine theory fit: (a) increasing knowledge and awareness of theories through the organized events and experiences of the course, and (b) an internal process of filtering theories through a personal and emotional lens.

The process counselors-in-training (CITs) go through when developing their professional identity is transformational, with the process integrating personal attributes with foundational knowledge (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). One foundational element of the multi-faceted professional identity development process is CITs acquiring knowledge of counseling theories and understanding how to apply and integrate the theories into professional practice (CACREP, 2015; Schmidt, 2001). Programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counselor Education and Related Programs (CACREP) emphasize the teaching, application and practice of theories in their standards as evidenced by the twenty-six references to theory in these standards, underscoring the value theories hold in the counseling profession (CACREP, 2015).

Furthermore, theories are the base of clinical practice that provides a framework for understanding client's behaviors and through a theoretical lens CITs can identify interventions to help a client change (Corey, 2016; Freeman, Hayes, Kuch, & Taub, 2007; Nelson & Prior, 2003). While the debate continues on the value of a theory orientation (Blow, Sprenkle, & Davis, 2007), most counseling programs encourage choosing one theory as beginning counselors rely on theories and techniques to assuage the anxiety during the shift from foundational classes to early clinical experiences (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993). This choice focuses early clinical work since CITs are lacking counseling experience to sort and organize a hierarchy of theories (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003) and aligning with one theory improves competence during this period (Murdock, Banta, Stromseth, Viene, & Brown, 1998).

CACREP counselor education programs include a foundational course on understanding and applying counseling theories often encouraging students to begin identifying with a primary counseling theory (American Counseling Association, 2014; Demir & İşmen Gazioğlu, 2016; Murdock et al., 1998). While classes in theory are required, the process of selecting a theoretical

orientation is complex and this complexity contributes to the minimal research on selecting a theoretical orientation (Boswell & Castonguay, 2007). Scholars have examined the relationship between personality, learning styles or therapeutic attitudes with theoretical orientation (Plchová, Hytych, Řiháček, Roubal, & Vybíral, 2016), yet an understanding of how the choice is made remains ambiguous. The impact of several variables, including personality, philosophical assumptions, and graduate training, have been considered to influence the development of theoretical orientation (Bitar, Bean, & Bermudez, 2007; Freeman et al., 2007; Murdock et al., 1998); however, no clear model exists for understanding how CITs theoretical development is impacted by a foundational theories course. This article discusses the results of a qualitative study examining the selection process CITs go through and based on the findings develops an educational model that assists the CIT in theory selection.

Central to this study is understanding the importance of theories in counselor training programs. Selecting a theoretical orientation (a) provides a framework for clinical practice (Cooper & McLeod, 2012; Schmidt, 2001); (b) contributes to greater professional efficacy as the CITs transition from foundational knowledge to clinical practice (Cashwell & Dooley, 2001); (c) provides direction to treatment (Magidson, Roberts, Collado-Rodriguez, & Lejuez, 2014; Nelson & Prior, 2003; Schmidt, 2001); and (d) reduces confusion over how to treat a client by novice practitioners (Blow & Sprenkle, 2001), and (e) prevents a rupture in the therapeutic alliance (Freeman et al., 2007). A productive counseling session incorporates a treatment plan (Young, 2016) utilizing concepts and interventions from a theory (Corey, 2016). This structure organizes treatment through an understanding of the change process and interventions to facilitate a reduction in the presenting issue (Nelson & Prior, 2003). Failing to create a theoretically sound treatment

plan causes client confusion during treatment, and that confusion contributing to a rupture in the therapeutic relationship (Freeman et al., 2007).

At some point, the CIT faces the task of aligning with a primary theoretical orientation (Murdock et al., 1998). There are many counseling theories available to students in counseling graduate programs and the task of choosing from those theories leaves the CITs questioning their competence and preparation, often causing a great deal of stress and anxiety (Jordan & Kelly, 2004). While many counseling programs present the primary theories, along with their histories, the characteristics, the strengths and limitations of the theory, a greater understanding of the process a CIT experiences may impact how educators approach designing theory-based courses and supervisors approach assisting the CIT in supervision.

A few studies investigated the theoretical orientation selection process during a graduate program (Bitar, Bean, & Bermúdez, 2007). Scholars found theory choice is influenced by personal factors, professional influences, and clinical experiences (Bitar et al., 2007; Norcross & Prochaska, 1983). Additionally, theory selection is affected by beliefs (Nelson & Prior, 2003), families and personal counseling experiences (Bitar et al., 2007). Studies investigating the factors contributing to theory selection found that personal factors (i.e. personal philosophy, values and previous counseling experience) and professional factors (i.e. undergraduate courses, clinical training and knowledge influenced the choices of theoretical orientation made by CITs (Bitar et al., 2007). Further research found there was not a correlation between Meyers-Briggs personality types and theory selection (Freeman et al., 2007), and that personal philosophy and values were the most influential in choosing a theory (Bitar et al., 2007). The process of selecting a theoretical orientation combines an exploration of the self, the theories and a matching process between the two (Mason, 2012; Schmidt, 2001). Nelson and Prior (2003) found marriage, couples and family

counseling CITs chose a theoretical orientation they believe will affect a positive change for the clients, how well the theory fits for the CIT and is influenced by how effective the CIT deems the theory. While few studies have investigated the factors contributing to the selection of a theoretical orientation, there is little knowledge of the effect of graduate classes in theories or graduate programs on the selection of a theory.

The selection of a theoretical orientation is a continual process that begins in graduate school (Freeman et al., 2007). However, a review of research does not find a model for teaching theories in a foundational class or how a counseling program should adapt to better facilitate the selection process for the CIT. This study explored two research questions: (a) how do counselors-in-training determine their own theoretical orientation; and (b) how is this process impacted by a graduate-level counseling theories course?

### **Method**

As a clear model of how a CIT selects a theoretical orientation is unknown, this study utilized a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) to examine the process. The constructivist grounded theory approach consists of a flexible set of guidelines and procedures for collecting and analyzing data with the goal of constructing an emerging conceptual model that is grounded directly in the participants lived experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Researchers utilizing this methodology aim to stay fully engaged in data collection and analysis, to gather rich descriptions of participant experiences through open questions, and to develop a conceptual model that reflects participants' experiences (Charmaz, 1996, 2014; Hays & Wood, 2011). IRB approval was obtained prior to beginning participant recruitment, and the study followed the ACA Code of Ethics guidelines for human subjects' research (American Counseling Association, 2014).

## **Participants**

This study utilized a purposive, convenience sample (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Creswell, 2014). The qualifications to participate in the study were (a) first year students in a masters-level counseling program, (b) completed a counseling theories class at a large public university in the southeastern United States during the fall semester, (c) completed the class in the same fall semester and (d) received a final theories course grade. While all participants were from the same university, they were enrolled in two separate sections of the theories course. Of the two classes, one class was co-taught by the authors and the second was taught by another faculty member and doctoral student team, neither of which were involved in the study. The two classes were chosen as they were identical in structure (e.g., syllabus, textbook, assignments) and the separate sections accounted for personal differences (e.g., teaching styles, group dynamics, pedagogy). After IRB approval, a recruitment email was sent to all students enrolled in the two sections asking potential participants to schedule an individual interview. The interviews were conducted in the subsequent spring and summer semesters and informed consent was obtained by all participants prior to beginning the interview and data collection. The researchers conducted the interviews in a face to face format and interviewed the participants individually to reduce peer pressure and group think from occurring.

A total of ten individuals participated in the study. Researchers recruited participants until interviews and initial analyses produced no new or more complex categories, indicating saturation of categories (Creswell, 2014). Eight participants identified as female, and two participants identified as male. Eight participants were white, one participant was black, and one participant was Asian. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 33 years.

## **Role of researcher**

As suggested by Charmaz (1996) and Flick (2009), constructivist grounded theory researchers use their own experiences or existing knowledge to sensitize them to constructs or phenomenon to be studied. Because researcher values, ideas, and knowledge impact the way they see and understand data, constructivist grounded theory researchers need to explicitly describe their position with the project, the participants, and the subject being explored (Ponterotto, 2005). In this study, participants were recruited from all sections of the theories course offered during the fall semester and both researchers acted as the instructors of one class section. As a result, a relationship between the researchers and more than half of the participants existed, as well as a detailed knowledge of their observable experience in the theories course. Although course grades were submitted before any participant interviews were conducted, how the instructor-student relationship impacted the data collection process is unclear. While some limitations are noted of being an “insider” or having an existing relationship with students prior to participation in the research study, Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) note several benefits of having an insider look at the studied phenomenon. As grounded theorists attempt to immerse themselves in the participant’s world, the pre-existing relationship between researcher and participants can help trust build more quickly and allow for richer data to emerge (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). To address the potential problems with this “insider” position, the researchers acknowledge their existing relationship with participants, ensured that data were collected outside the normal working conditions of the existing relationship (so for this study, after the course and evaluations were complete), and used constant comparative methods to step outside the insider role and look at the data from a more observational, outsider view (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002).



## **Description of Theories Course**

The participants enrolled in a 15-week required course for all master's level counseling students at the university. Students take the course during their first semester in the counseling program. Participants were recruited from two sections of the same course, taught by a faculty member-doctoral student team and another faculty member and doctoral student team. Each class meeting consisted of two main parts: (a) a lecture covering one specific counseling theory, and (b) a time of practicing and processing in small groups. To prepare for class each week, students completed textbook readings and a written assignment identifying key concepts from the readings. Instructors supplemented the lecture component with video demonstrations of each theory, along with practice examples from the instructors. Additional course assignments included weekly quizzes and a final theory paper.

## **Data collection**

Using a developed interview protocol the researchers conducted individual, semi-structured interviews. Consistent with a constructivist grounded theory approach, the protocol consisted of open-ended questions about the influences in theory selection that were designed to gather rich descriptions of each participant's experience (Charmaz, 2014; Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim using an online transcription service then audited to verify transcription accuracy, and all participant names were changed to protect the participants and reduce researcher bias.

The interviewers asked the participants seven questions during individual interviews (see Appendix). The topical questions focused on (a) previous knowledge of theories before the participants started the theories course, (b) how the class shaped their theory choices, (c) the personal process the participant experienced in choosing a theory and (d) their understanding of

theories after the course. The interviewers provided sufficient time to respond to each question and these open-ended questions created rich data.

### **Data analysis**

Interview data were coded using Charmaz's four levels of coding (2014). In order to be immersed in the data (Charmaz, 2014), researchers completed initial, line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts he or she conducted. This level of coding was completed using either handwritten notes on transcripts or type notes on an electronic version of the transcripts, depending on coder preference. Each investigator then completed focused coding for those interviews, beginning the process of organizing the initial codes into more broad categories (Charmaz, 2014). The investigators shuffled and categorized codes based on their initial similarities or relationships, making notes and charts for each category. For axial level coding, researchers coded interview transcripts completed by the other investigator, identifying more specific broad themes across participant interviews (Charmaz, 2014). All notes and code lists were shared between investigators at this point. Once both researchers completed axial coding, the researchers discussed emerging themes and potential theoretical codes. In these discussions, a draft model was sketched and discussed, with both investigators working towards a visual representation of emerging categories and relationships. Finally, the principle investigator completed the theoretical coding in consultation with the other investigator. The principle investigator combined previous level of coding notes and memos to draw the emerging conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

### **Credibility, Originality, and Usefulness**

To address the trustworthiness of qualitative research, researchers seek to establish the credibility of qualitative results (Shenton, 2004). Credibility addresses the question of whether the data presented are congruent with reality (Shenton, 2004). The researchers ensured the data

credibility by utilizing a well-established qualitative method with published guidelines, incorporating their own reflective commentary into the analysis process, (Shenton, 2004) and collecting data that provided a thick description of the topic being studied (Charmaz, 2014; Shenton, 2004). Charmaz (2014) suggests credible qualitative studies employ a systematic process of comparing categories of data. By sharing coding responsibilities, both researchers had the opportunity to review all collected data, participate actively in all levels of coding, and ensure that the emerging conceptual model accurately represented the experiences of all participants. Additionally, the emerging conceptual model for this study was developed with strong links to the original data, including specific statements and experiences across multiple participants (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, after the data was coded the participants reviewed themes to ensure the researchers' coding accurately reflected their perceptions.

The resulting conceptual model demonstrates originality. Originality in grounded theory studies is achieved when the analysis produces a model that “challenges, extends, and refines current ideas, concepts, and practices” (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 337). While some existing research indicates personal experiences or characteristics informs theoretical orientation, the results of this study demonstrates a parallel internal and external process counselors-in-training utilize to determine goodness of fit. Finally, the analysis resulted in a model that demonstrates usefulness for counselor development and counselor education. Charmaz (2014) suggests that useful grounded theory analyses result in conceptual models contribute to existing knowledge, spark additional research in related areas, demonstrate some common processes, and is practically useful. The conceptual model that emerged in this study provides a practical framework for understanding how counselors-in-training begin narrowing down their theoretical orientation and illustrates how training programs may influence the development of that theoretical orientation.

## **Results**

The data provided insight into the two research questions. The research questions were “how do counselors-in-training determine their own theoretical orientation?” and “how is this process impacted by a graduate-level counseling theories course?”. The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 represents the experiences of participants described earlier. This model illustrates how CITs determine their theoretical orientation, as well as the intersection of the theories course with their individual process of establishing which theory fit for them. To protect participant confidentiality, each participant chose a pseudonym at the time of the interview to be used in reporting study results.

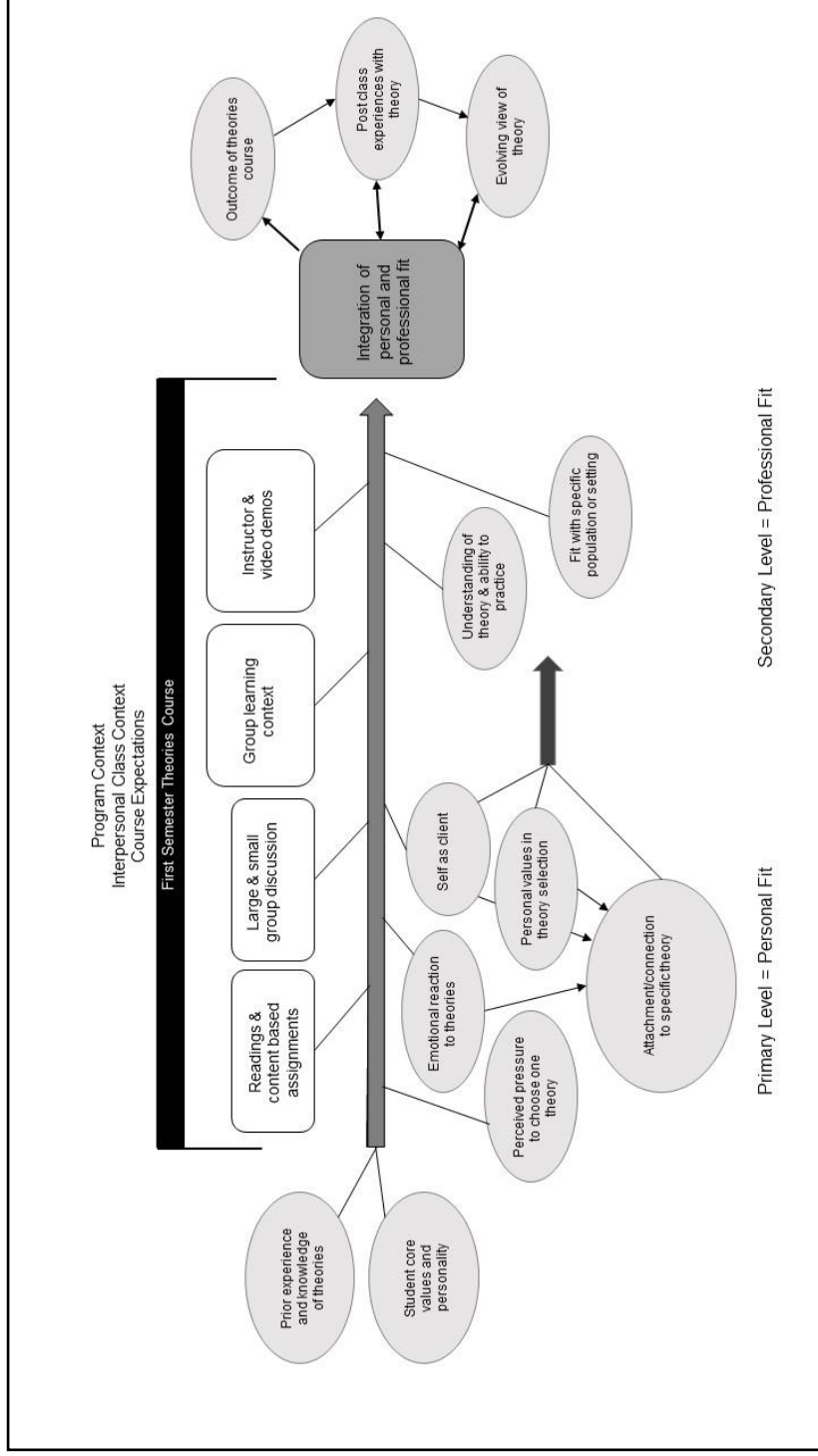
### **External and Internal processes**

As seen in Figure 1, the participants described two parallel processes, one being the experiences and activities of the course itself and the second being the ways participants filtered the course material through both a personal and professional lens to determine goodness-of-fit. Participants described how specific course experiences helped move them through the process of determining which theory fit for them, as well as discussing factors that contributed to why a specific theory did or did not fit. The conceptual model is composed of internal and external processes consisting of several broad categories stemming from the research questions. These two processes appeared to be parallel at times, with participants describing class experiences and internal process separately. At other times, participants describe the interactions between the external and internal processes, such as ways specific assignments triggered internal reflection.

### **External Processes**

The researchers defined the external processes as outwardly occurring for the participants and within the course structure. The external processes, representing the theories course itself, are

Figure 1 - Counselor-in-training theoretical orientation development



organized into four main domains: (a) class content, (b) class experience, (c) outcome of the theories class, and (d) post class process. Each domain is described below.

**Class content.** Participants identified three main assignments impacting their understanding of counseling theories, (a) weekly reflection papers, (b) weekly quizzes, and (c) the final paper where the CIT identified a theory he, she or they most closely aligned with. Referring to the reflection papers on assigned readings, Apple stated, “I really did like the assignment where we had to pick three quotes and three terms. That wasn't something that we had to do in undergrad, and so I never had to think about what a theory would look like.” And Carrie stated about the reflection papers, “it really made you think about each theory.”

In addition to weekly assignments, the final paper required participants to describe their own theoretical orientation seemed to greatly influence understanding theories. For example, Henry explained, “[the] final paper to choose one or two of the theories and explain my whole understanding of the theories was also very helpful to help me to learn deeper meaning of those theories.”

Several participants highlighted the importance of seeing theories demonstrated by course instructors or in videos. Annie stated, “Hearing [teaching assistant], would kind of mimic the theories a little bit in her interaction like when she explains CBT that one like really stands out of my memory.” Kim found the video demonstrations to be helpful, saying, “For me that was important to actually see it played out.” Janice described the role of participant learning style in the external process, stating “I'm a visual learner. Reading a book is not going to be helpful for me. I need to be practicing and seeing it.” Although most participants found the assignments and content in the theories course to be helpful overall, the descriptions above suggest class content highlights

the interplay between their external process of completing the assignments and gaining knowledge; also elucidating the effect of the course on theory development.

**Class experiences.** Participants highlighted the importance of the group-oriented learning environment. For example, Janice emphasized the importance of small group discussion along with small group practice, stating, “When we broke off into little groups, those really helped because we actually got to practice it out. It's something on paper when you look at it, it sounds great but then you actually start practicing.”

Additionally, participants highlighted the impact of large and small group in-class discussions. Kayley explained “we really got a chance to dialog about the theories and to ask questions and to get feedback and tweak in nuance our understanding.” Describing the small group discussions, Apple explained, “See the most interesting one was when some of us didn't really like it. There was one time like I didn't like solution-focused theory, whoever I was with really did and I was like, ‘Why do you like this theory?’ So, it was great. It was like having conversation with the theory, I really like that because it makes it alive.” These statements indicate that participants considered the opportunity to hear others’ viewpoints in addition to their own perspectives on the readings important to developing their theoretical orientation. When describing the effect of the theories course on personal theory selection, the interpersonal context of the courses seemed significant to eight of the ten participants, who repeatedly described the interpersonal relationships with both classmates and course instructors. The data addressed the first research question in explaining the influence of class experiences creating a community feeling and the class and small group discussions on theory selection.

**Outcome of Theories Class.** The findings of this study support CACREP’s emphasis on understanding theories during CIT’s graduate classes and the following statements support the

importance and outcome of a theories course. Janice explained, “the [theories] that I really resonated with are the ones that I know in detail and I'm gonna take with me.” Kayley added, “while acknowledging I’m still a [counseling] baby, [the class] gave me a really, really good foundation for understanding the theories.” Additionally, participants recognized theoretical knowledge continued developing after completing the theories course. Cara stated other classes continued her narrowing selection process, “I actually found [group] class to be a little challenging of my views because I'm a very... I don't want to say anti CBT, but it just didn't do anything for me. So all they did is CBT fashion and I was like ‘wow, you can't argue with the results.” Carrie added, “(theory development) keeps getting more solid from each class, each semester...I think it's just being affirmed what I learned through the baseline and theories.” The participants highlight choosing a theory is not a simple decision, but an ongoing process. Annie states, “I think for people coming into theories in the first semester, there’s a lot of pressure to choose one and even when we’re graduating we have to talk about one theory and how we applied it, and then talking to counselors outside of the program I’ve heard that one theory just doesn’t work because not every client will work with that one theory.”

The model in Fig.1 identifies the interaction of the internal and external processes on CITs theory selection. The participant data supports the development of class content, class experiences and course outcome as external processes. Finally, the external processes contribute to addressing the researcher’s questions with a better understanding of how CITs choose a theory and the effect of a theories course on that choice.

### **Internal Processes**

Concurrent with the external processes described above, participants experienced internal processes influencing their theoretical orientation both during and after the counseling theories



course. These internal processes have two consecutive levels: (a) the personal level, and (b) the professional level. All participants seemed to evaluate theories through one or more of the domains from the personal level, often using their experiences in the course to facilitate this process. In contrast, only a few participants processed and evaluated theories at the professional level. Both the personal level and professional level of processing theory are described below.

**Personal level.** The data showed the most prevalent and impactful mode of evaluating a theory was at a personal level. CITs would consider the theory from their worldview and determine if the theory would “fit” for them. The following domains further explain the evaluation at a personal level.

*Self.* Perhaps the strongest element of the primary, personal level of evaluating theory was participants’ attachment or connection with a specific theory or elements of a specific theory. While some participants connected to a specific theory element, others expressed a broader type of connection or attachment. For example, Carrie highlighted the intersection of her personality, values, and her connection with a specific theory, explaining, “I was looking for something that was all encompassing with my personality.” The connection or attachment to a specific theory, combined with emotional responses to theory, personal values and personality, and viewing self as client, comprised the primary, personal level of evaluating theory for participants.

Participants reflected on the relationship between their personal values and counseling theory by imagining their self as a counseling client. Cara stated, “I think existential started to resonate for me because the theory itself felt very right for me ... I need to be existentially counseled”. She went on to explain, “I think my perspective was both how would I feel receiving this type of counseling and how would I expect someone else to feel receiving this type of

counseling.” By positioning self as client, participants aligned with theories they believed would be helpful in their own personal and emotional growth.

In addition to the elements of personal attachment to a theory and determining the fit when imagining the self as a client, most participants described some level of emotional reactions to a few theories. These emotional reactions seemed to influence the participants’ understanding and acceptance for the theory itself. Janice explained, “Reality [theory], when that hit and I got really excited because it was more of how I think and how my personality is.” The emotional responses seemed to be connected with participants’ personal beliefs as well as strong emotional attachments to certain theories. The interplay of participants’ personal beliefs, personality, and emotions had a significant impact on how the participants’ viewed and evaluated counseling theories.

*Values.* In addition to entering the class with limited or no prior knowledge of theories, participants noted they entered with existing core values and personality traits that influenced their perceptions of counseling theories. For example, one participant chose a theory based on how she relates to people. Similarly, Kayley explained that some theories, “just connected with a lot of points of my personality, like valuing position of inquiry, valuing hope and the optimism and the story elements that are so important to me.”

Participants used personal values as a filter for sorting theories during this personal level of theory understanding. For example, Annie said, “From the theories I chose, I used personal core values to determine (my choice), so person-centered has a lot of values that I identify with.” Participants used course assignments and informal processes to reflect on the congruence between their own personality and values with the counseling theories. All participants stated personality traits and values influenced their theory selection and were present prior to the counseling theories

course. The data addresses both research questions examining the factors impacting the selection process and the effect of a theories course.

***Knowledge and choice.*** Participants entered the course with varying levels of pre-existing knowledge on counseling theories. Some participants were exposed to theory as undergraduate students, but most perceived that they had very little knowledge. For example, Annie shared, “I took one counseling class in undergrad that went through most of the theories. I looked back at the texts to kind of see what I had studied, but I wasn’t very familiar.” Other participants were able to name a specific theoretical orientation from a previous class. Carrie stated, “I knew about Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) interventions and maybe the premise of what they were and what that was about.” While some participants had limited knowledge of theories when entering the course, no participants felt the knowledge to be sufficient for understanding how to apply theory to practice indicating the process of selecting a theory was impacted by gaining greater knowledge about the individual theories in the class.

Additionally, several participants eluded to a perceived pressure to determine their own theoretical orientation by the end of the counseling theories course, and this pressure seemed to create some anxiety for several participants. For example, Annie explained, “Because there is like pressure to decide and even now I still think to myself with which question should I ask from which theory and deciding to choose which one to go is scary.” Although participants seemed to feel this pressure throughout the course, most participants stated that after the theories course they were still undecided or had a more evolving view of theoretical orientation.

**Professional level.** While all participants seemed to go through the personal level of theory evaluation described above, only a few participants seemed to evaluate theories on the professional level. At this level two category emerged, participants experienced the internal processes of

practicing a chosen theory and determining how each theory might work with a specific population or clinical setting. In a sense, this level illustrated a shift in participant thinking from self as client to self as counselor. On a professional level, two main elements emerged which are explained below.

***Understanding theory & ability to practice.*** Some participants in this level of theory evaluation considered their own understanding and their potential ability to practice effectively from that perspective as a way to evaluate the theory. For example, Cara explained her process by saying, “partly just reading about it, imagining myself doing it and then partly when we practiced in small groups. [Practice] gave me a chance to see what felt comfortable and which ones kind of made sense for me which ones felt okay to do as a counselor.” While some participants considered their own understanding and ability when evaluating theory, most participants did not discuss this element as part of their internal theory evaluation process.

***Fit with specific population & setting.*** In addition to evaluating the theory’s practicability, some participants considered the theory’s application to a specific setting or population. When considering applicability to a specific clinical setting, only one participant seemed to highlight this element of theory selection. Janice, a future school counselor, emphasized when considering the structure or interventions of specific theories, “thinking that they're [counseling] in a school counseling setting and you don't have time.” While most participants were able to consider the applicability of the theory with self as client, very few considered self as counselor or a specific clinical setting as an element of theory fit.

Participants’ descriptions of their experience in the theories course illustrates how participants attempt to integrate their external and internal process to determine which theory best fit for them. The participants reported this process of integrating personal and professional fit

continued past the end of the theories course. While the theories course itself had a significant impact, the post-class experiences with other course work and ongoing reflection seemed to create an evolving understanding of theory in some participants.

### **Discussion**

This study examined how CITs experience selecting a theoretical orientation and how foundational classes in theories and graduate programs affect the process. An analysis of the data indicates CITs experience a parallel selection process both externally and internally. This finding is congruent with Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss' (2009) statement that counselors' professional identity is developed through both interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences. The external process occurs in the theories class, in other classes, in discussions with peers and in completing assignments. The data also highlights the internal process the CIT experiences as he, she or they evaluate the theory through two lenses; a personal lens and the lens of the self as a future counselor. While a counseling program determines the external process, the internal process is developed by the CIT. The findings highlight the complex selection process CITs experience during their foundational classes and supports previous researcher's finding (Bitar et al., 2007; Nelson & Prior, 2003) further developing their findings into a model. In essence, CITs filtered all their experiences with the theories course through an internal filter, looking for personal and professional fit. This data suggests there is value in developing program-integrated curriculum supporting the ongoing process CITs go through in selecting a theoretical orientation during their graduate studies. The role of the graduate course itself in structuring the external process of developing an understanding of self as a practitioner is consistent with Auxier et al. (2003) conceptualization of student development, indicating the first cycle reflects a dependence on expert opinion to form initial views before evaluating those ideas more autonomously. Additionally, the findings support

previous studies that found for most CITs the selection of a theoretical orientation is a process more than a single decision. Previous studies explored the internal selection process and this study found the external and internal processes are both vitally important.

### **Implications for Counselor Education**

This study's findings have several important implications. The first implication educators may consider when conceptualizing counseling theories classes is providing CITs opportunities to (a) participate in peer discussions about the merits of the theory, (b) gain experience from role-playing each theoretical perspective, and (c) provide demonstrations of the theory in practice to model what appropriate application would look like. This structure, drawing on both the current study's findings regarding theoretical orientation development and Auxier et al (2003) findings on professional identity development, allows students to develop over time using conceptual learning, experiential learning, and external evaluation. Also, educators should consider providing activities allowing CITs discovery and examination of internal values and experiences influencing choosing a theory. The influence of internal values and previous experiences is consistent with Brott & Myers (1999) findings related to professional identity development for school counselors. Brott & Myers (1999) found that school counselors worked to blend the influences of several aspects, including their own personal guidelines or ideas about themselves as a professional. For example, reflective assignments requiring CITs to identify their values and evaluate the fit with a theory could facilitate their theory selection. Since few CITs seemed to evaluate the theories from a professional standpoint, counselor educators could support this process by making the self-as-counselor perspective required in some reflective assignments. Finally, incorporating the internal and external processes the student experiences during the course and the emotional processes that

affect theory selection. Based on the findings of this study, these considerations should be incorporated into instructional design.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study contributes to better understanding the process CITs experience in theory development, and while the research team made every effort to minimize limitations, some limitations are worth considering. More than half of the participants were enrolled in the class section taught by the research team. While the researchers attempted to control for this by conducting interviews after the grades were finalized, this limitation may have created some bias and future researchers should consider avoiding participating as class instructors.

Another limitation impacting this study is the geographic concentration of the participants to one university. Future research should include a more geographically diverse sample. The final limitation is length of time for data collection. The interviews were conducted the semesters after the participants finished their theories course and as indicated in this and previous studies, the external factors of the program impact theory choice. Considering the data highlighting the selection of a theoretical orientation as a continual process, future researchers should consider a longitudinal study examining theory development through CITs graduate work to better understand this impact.

Finally, future researchers should investigate if the personality and educational ability of the instructor affects theory choice. Several participants reported the instructors' influence on their decision-making. Both sections of the theories course used for recruitment in this study seemed to be taught in a similar style. It is unclear whether the personality and style of the instructor influenced the nature of the internal process experienced by participating CITs. The researchers

recognized the effect of the instructor and would recommend future researchers examine the correlation between these two variables.

## **Conclusion**

Narrowing down a theoretical orientation is an essential task for counselors-in-training (CACREP, 2016; Schmidt, 2001). While this process can be anxiety-provoking for CITs, counselor educators can facilitate this narrowing down process by incorporating assignments, classroom experiences, and a classroom climate that encourages counselors in training to assess their own personal values and developing professional identity and facilitating the process of examining each counseling theory through both the personal and professional lens. Removing the pressure to choose one theoretical orientation in those early classes may allow CITs to fully explore the fit of each theory over the course of their training.



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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

- How would you describe your knowledge and understanding of counseling theories prior to beginning your counseling program?
- Were there course experiences or assignments that were helpful in developing your understanding of counseling theories?
- Were there course experiences or assignments that were not helpful in developing your understanding of counseling theories?
- At what point in the semester did the theories begin to “fit” for you or become more personal?
- How did you determine which theories fit for you and which theories did not fit?
- If you had to identify one or two aspects of this course that had a significant impact on you as a counselor-in-training, what would those aspects be? Why were those specific aspects significant for you?
- How would you describe your knowledge and understanding of counseling theories now?