



COUNSELING AND
PSYCHOTHERAPY
THEORIES IN
CONTEXT AND
PRACTICE

SKILLS, STRATEGIES, AND TECHNIQUES

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What Is Counseling?

In some settings, an evaluative or judgmental distinction is made between the practice of counseling and psychotherapy. In fact, Alfred Adler, whom we'll get to know much more intimately in Chapter 3, might claim that counseling has an inferiority complex with respect to its slightly older sibling, psychotherapy (Adler, 1958). Or, perhaps more accurately, it could be claimed that psychotherapy has a superiority complex with respect to its younger rival, counseling. Either way, at some point you may notice or experience a judgmental-sounding side to the distinction between psychotherapy and counseling.

Overall, counselors have struggled with the definition of their craft in ways similar to psychotherapists. Consider, for example, this quotation:

Counseling is indeed an ambiguous enterprise. It is done by persons who can't agree on what to call themselves, what credentials are necessary to practice, or even what the best way is to practice—whether to deal with feelings, thoughts, or behaviors; whether to be primarily supportive or confrontational; whether to focus on the past or the present. Further, the consumers of counseling services can't exactly articulate what their concerns are, what counseling can and can't do for them, or what they want when it's over. (Kottler & Brown, 1996)

As with the term *psychotherapy*, a good definition of *counseling* is hard to find. Here is a sampling of counseling definitions:

1. "Counseling is the artful application of scientifically derived psychological knowledge and techniques for the purpose of changing human behavior" (Burke, 1989).
2. "Counseling is a helping relationship that includes someone seeking help and someone willing to give help who is trained to help in a setting that permits help to be given and received" (Cormier & Hackney, 1987).
3. "Counseling consists of whatever ethical activities a counselor undertakes in an effort to help the client engage in those types of behavior that will lead to a resolution of the client's problems" (Krumboltz, 1965).
4. "[Counseling is] an activity . . . for working with relatively normal-functioning individuals who are experiencing developmental or adjustment problems" (Kottler & Brown, 1996).

With both lists of definitions in mind, we turn now to the question of the differences between counseling and psychotherapy.

What Are the Differences between Psychotherapy and Counseling?

Patterson (1973) has answered this question directly by claiming: "There are no essential differences between counseling and psychotherapy." Of course, Patterson's com-

ment could be taken to mean that although there are no essential differences between counseling and psychotherapy, there are *unessential* differences.

On this issue, we find ourselves in step with Corsini and Wedding (2000): Counseling and psychotherapy are the same qualitatively; they differ only quantitatively; there is nothing that a psychotherapist does that a counselor does not do. (p. 2)

Both counselors and psychotherapists engage in the same behaviors—listening, questioning, interpreting, explaining, advising, and so on. However, often they do so in different proportions.

Generally, psychotherapists are less directive, go a little deeper, work a little longer with individual cases, and charge a higher fee. In contrast, counselors are slightly more directive, work more on developmentally normal—but troubling—issues, work more overtly at the surface, work more briefly with individual clients, and charge a bit less for their services. Of course, in the case of individual counselors and psychotherapists, each of these rules may be reversed, because, for example, some counselors may choose to work longer with clients and charge more, whereas some psychotherapists may choose to work more briefly with clients and charge less. Additionally, although it used to be the case that counselors worked with less disturbed clients and that psychotherapists worked with more disturbed patients, now, perhaps because obtaining services from master’s-level counselors or social workers is generally less expensive, counselors often work more than psychotherapists with clients who have extensive personal and family problems.

Questions for Reflection

What are your thoughts on the differences and similarities of counseling and psychotherapy? In your community and at your university are counseling and psychotherapy considered with equal (or unequal) reverence? Go back and review the nine different definitions of counseling and psychotherapy we have given. Which definition did you find most appealing? Which one did you find least appealing? Before proceeding, list what you consider to be the most important parts of a comprehensive definition of counseling and psychotherapy.

A Working Definition of Counseling and Psychotherapy

At the very least, there are strong similarities between the practice of counseling and psychotherapy. At the most, they may be considered virtually identical procedures. Because the similarities vastly outweigh the differences, for the purposes of this book, we will use the words *counseling* and *psychotherapy* interchangeably. And sometimes we will insert the word *therapy* as a third, perhaps less divisive, alternative.

After you review the various definitions for counseling and psychotherapy, we wish we could provide you with an exact, elegant, formulaic definition for these terms, or the activity they represent. However, the best we can offer is a working definition based, more or less, on a compilation of the preceding definitions.

For the purposes of this text, we define counseling and psychotherapy as a process that involves

a trained person who practices the artful application of scientifically derived principles for establishing professional helping relationships with persons who seek assistance in resolving large or small psychological or relational problems. This is accomplished through ethically defined means and involves, in the broadest sense, some form of learning or human development.

It's also important to distinguish between the concepts of *therapy* and *therapeutic*. A therapist in Syracuse, New York, locally renowned for his work with other therapists, told us that he believed life itself was therapeutic (J. Land, personal communication, March 16, 1986). We've all had therapeutic experiences with a friend, spouse, or relative. However, by our definition, these experiences would not qualify as therapy. Therapy entails a relationship established for a specific purpose, protected by both a professional knowledge-base and a set of ethical principles. Further, our definition, as well as most definitions of therapy, does not fit any self-administered forms of therapy, such as self-analysis or self-hypnosis.

WHAT IS A THEORY?

As long as we're making our way through elusive definitions, we may as well attempt to define the word *theory*. A theory is defined as "a coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena" (Random House unabridged dictionary, 1993, p. 1967).

Basically, a theory involves a gathering together and organizing of knowledge about a particular object or phenomenon. In psychology, theories are used to generate hypotheses about human thinking, emotions, and behavior. Most of us, as a function of being the social creatures that we are, build our own personalized theories about human behavior. These personal theories guide the ways in which we observe and evaluate others. This makes all of us theorists (or potential theorists) even though our thinking is not as explicit (or as detailed—or perhaps as tedious) as that of most famous psychological theorists.

Within the context of psychotherapy and counseling, a theory needs to accurately describe, explain, and predict a wide range of therapist and client behaviors. A theory also needs to have relevance to its domain. For example, a good theory should clearly explain what causes client problems (or psychopathology) and offer ideas or specific strategies for how to alleviate these problems. Additionally, a good theory will help us predict client responses to various therapy techniques. Specifically, these predictions should help us know what techniques to use, how long therapy normally will last, and how a particular technique is likely to affect a particular client.

Despite their strong eclectic or integrational orientation, Prochaska and Norcross (2003) describe the importance of psychological theory for the practice of psychotherapy and counseling:

Without a guiding theory . . . , clinicians would be vulnerable, directionless creatures bombarded with literally hundreds of impressions and pieces of information in a single session. Is it more important to ask about color preferences, early memories, parent relationships, life's meaning, disturbing emotions, environmental reinforcers, thought processes, sexual conflicts, or something else in the first interview? (Prochaska & Norcross, 2003, pp. 5–6)

One of the greatest tasks of a theory is to provide therapists with a clear model or foundation from which they can conduct their professional service. To be without a theory, to be a “vulnerable, directionless creature,” is something most of us would just as soon avoid.

Some psychological theorists believe their particular theory can and should be used to predict and control human behavior (Skinner, 1971). This is a fear Hollywood capitalizes on occasionally, with films such as *A Clockwork Orange*. There is no doubt that to some degree this is a goal of many theories. However, as British psychologist David Smail writes, we should be concerned when prediction and control become the goal of psychological theory:

[T]he prediction and control of human behavior is, as an aim of human inquiry, no new phenomenon: it expresses an intellectual aspiration as old as magic, and restates a practical interest dear to the hearts of tyrants ever since time began. (Smail, 1984, p. 47)

Although Smail’s concerns are important to consider, most theories in this book were primarily derived to explain and address suffering and to facilitate human healing, growth and development.

Questions for Reflection

As you read through this text, we will regularly remind you to step back and evaluate whatever theory we are currently discussing. In each chapter, be sure to ask yourself how well the theory assists you in understanding and helping clients through and beyond their personal problems. In addition, consistently try to ask critical questions about the theories. As Smail might ask, “How does each theory potentially tyrannize clients?”