Advanced Counselling: Integrating Theory with the Self

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Student counsellors must develop introspective awareness over the course of their programs. This may be a difficult task for some, as it requires patience, self-awareness, and the motivation to develop the skill more fully. As a skill, introspection is necessary to uncover bias, strengths, and the motivations of counsellors in order to better assist their future clients and communities. Psychology further acknowledges the necessity of this skill, as many psychologists and psychotherapists in practice today emphasize the importance of moving toward integrative praxis—which is to say, using an integrative approach to counselling, while incorporating the self within such theoretical orientations. To incorporate the self, then, refers to building on our self-awareness and utilizing the strengths that we identify, or uncover, within our self-awareness practices. As a counselling student myself, the need of self-awareness must be demonstrated and reflected on in order to further my training. This paper examines the nature of multitheoretical integrative models, and more specifically, examines the Multitheoretical Psychotherapy model, in relation to my own epistemological underpinnings. In this paper, then, I argue that while the Multitheoretical Psychotherapy model is a useful tool in addressing the varied needs of clients, the model must be complemented with other ways of conducting knowledge in order to more effectively evoke change in client narratives. I demonstrate this through a thorough reflection of my own epistemology as feminist, queer, postmodern, and critical in nature. In doing so, I integrate the Multitheoretical Psychotherapy model's concepts of Systemic-Constructivist and Multicultural-Feminist, and argue for the complementary nature of my background in integration of the two. Ultimately, I hope to underline that counsellor strengths can provide a richness that may not otherwise be present in many mainstream theories of psychology.

Multitheoretical Psychotherapy – Brooks-Harris

Counselling literature has seen a visible push toward postmodernity within the last two decades. As more counsellors, psychotherapists, and psychologists embrace holistic praxis within the broader landscape of academic discourse, integrative approaches have become the norm. In order to place myself within contextual practice, it is necessary here to briefly describe the Multitheoretical approach to counselling within Integrative theories. Such approaches to counselling fall under this umbrella, among them Common Factors, Assimilative, and other theories. The Multitheoretical approach itself is an integrative model that focuses on intentional and strategic practice. It differs from other models in that the goal is "to provide a framework that one can use for two or more theories" (Jones-Smith, 2012, p. 589). In other words, this approach values aspects from all schools of thought within psychology, and seeks to incorporate the most relevant aspects of each. Multitheoretical Psychotherapy (MTP) is one model that uses this approach.

Multitheoretical Psychotherapy is a recent model developed by Jeff Brooks-Harris (2008) to address the changing landscape of counselling praxis toward integration. This is the model I shall use in context of my own foundational epistemologies, and thus an overview follows here. The model was developed by combining technical eclecticism and theoretical integration, but has found usefulness in assimilative practice for trainees who require a foundational theory (Harris, Kelly, Campbell & Hammond, 2014). The

MTP model is influenced by a number of factors; it orients itself around three main components—ineffective thoughts, feelings, and actions—in order to explain the cause of human dysfunction. In saying this, however, it should be noted that the model is informed by contextual dimensions of biological, interpersonal, cultural, and systemic factors in order to create a complete picture of the client. Brooks-Harris further informs this understanding through seven key theoretical approaches: (1) cognitive, (2) behavioral, (3) experiential, (4) biopsychosocial, (5) psychodynamic, (6) systemic, and (7) multicultural (Jones-Smith, 2012, p. 590). These theories are then further broken into key strategies in order to facilitate the goals, or principles of the model.

Integrative psychotherapy within this framework should be thought of as intentional, multidimensional, multitheoretical, strategy-based, and relational (Harris et al., 2014). When psychotherapy is contextualized within these principles there is an empowerment factor that should be accounted for; it allows for client autonomy and freedom in addressing preferences, personality factors, and social location. MTP provides many benefits over traditional psychotherapeutic theories. For example, it includes a step-by-step treatment plan with case presentation guidelines, multidimensional surveys for clients and therapists, and other training references. This offers an important grounding for best practices, providing practicing and student psychotherapists with a means through which to learn intentionality and flexibility by building on basic microskills. The model has also been implicated in Attachment Theory (Gold, 2011), and treatment for depression (Harris, Kelly, and Sheppard, 2015).

It is limited, however, in its jack-of-all-trades approach to theory. While Brooks-Harris prizes components from a broad range of psychological theories, he fails to address how and why these components should be necessarily privileged over other components. I argue that this subjective lens through which Brooks-Harris lays the foundations of the MPT model does little to account for the influences of social location. That is to say, it has yet been shown how the author's experiences and identities within dominant group culture (i.e. white, cisgender, male) has affected the groundwork for this model. The question must be asked—can this model truly be useful for those outside of dominant, hegemonic narratives? As a relatively new model within counselling literature, more research from a post-structural, feminist, and critical lens must be conducted in determining the relevance for marginalized communities in particular. While it may be argued that Brooks-Harris includes multicultural theories within the model, I cautiously argue this point, as a white, cisgender, male person, that a 'truer' conceptualization of feminist theory within the multicultural aspects of MPT should bring in other members from the community to co-define the central aspects of these theories for practical use. This is not to suggest that the model may have no use for such communities, but simply to underline the need for critical engagement with psychological praxis.

Feminist Epistemologies

It is necessary here to position myself between my own epistemic background and the MTP model. As a student of counselling, I bring my own experiences and social location into my practice, which requires a critical engagement between the two. I define myself as influenced by postmodern, poststructural, critical, feminist, and queer theorists and concepts, with a particular emphasis on feminist theories. Coming from a marginalized background, I am offered more opportunities to critique dominant theories, as my experiences have converged to see how out-groups may be treated on a systemic and systematic level. Using these experiences, as well as my social identities, I reflect here on my positionality, underlining my epistemology using academic language in order to negotiate my voice against larger institutions.

Using such academic, prescriptivist language, it is essential to define my theories in relation to my own background, beginning with postmodern concepts. Postmodern theories began to arise in the latter half of the recent century. The increase in popularity of postmodernism has been largely attributed to a growing lack of faith in meta or grand narratives, which has traditionally dominated academic discourse (Badenhorst, McLeod, & Joy, 2012). In essence, postmodern ideologies are a shift away from traditional, positivist notions of conducting research, and indeed understanding the world. Such traditional methods are still important, however their authority within academia has limited scholarship, especially among disadvantaged groups. An epistemic shift of sorts has occurred that decentres "empirical" ways of seeking knowledge, as social constructivism has given a voice to those whose experience may otherwise be left invisible. Social constructivism, then, highlights that knowledge is generated by social bodies of people who agree on a particular meaning. This has radically shifted social sciences and humanities research as concepts which were once considered "true" have been questioned through their re-examination. As mentioned previously, people from disenfranchised groups are able to participate in academic discourse using this new way of seeking knowledge in a way that has never happened before, resulting in a greater ability to serve these populations—especially from a psychological perspective.

Critical discourse is the larger force behind postmodernism. While postmodernity can be thought of as a temporal state of understanding the world, critical theories seek to challenge and question dominant narratives in a broader sense. My own experiences and integration of these theories into my identities have been influenced by my undergraduate education. Coming from an arts background (Communications), I was first exposed to critical theories in a seminar course on the same topic. These theories stuck with me as they gave me a language to understand my own experiences as a lower-class queer person. It was Said's (1979) theory of the Other which influenced my understanding of how cognitive shifts of seeing the world can lead to (dis)enfranchisement of certain groups (ex. the 'Oriental' as strange and mysterious). Foucault's (1975; see also 1990) concept of power in relation to institutions such as the prison system and sexuality influenced the entire social sciences field as well as myself; he created a macroconcept that was able to put into perspective the invisible, abstract ways that control occurs. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of Cultural Capital, or the ways in which we can define and see class through nonverbal attitudes, actions, clothing, and image, as opposed to just financial means, and more specifically, Sub-Cultural Capital, allowed for an understanding of class and queer sub-culture. To be sure, critical discourse has shaped the epistemologies through which I understand psychology.

Feminist discourse in particular has lent itself to a deeper understanding of social influences. Specifically, I refer to the concept of locational feminism, or social location (Enns, 2010; Anthias, 2012). Our social location is made up of the constellation of experiences and identities which has shaped how we see the world in the present moment. This location can include ethnicity, race, (dis)ability, gender, sexuality, geolocation, and religion, but is not limited to those. It can be argued that locational feminism is one of the most prolific concepts to come from feminist discourse. It has made its way into academic disciplines outside of gender studies and the humanities, and has even gone so far as to encapsulate 'youth culture' through mediums such as Tumblr and social media avenues, known in these spaces as privilege and privileged identities. As a concept, social location, or privilege, has influenced social justice by introducing a lens through which we can see our identities in connection with our experiences. Take Black Lives Matter, for instance, a platform which stresses social location in opposition of dominant groupings. Other critical theories complement and interact with each other, such as Foucault's power conceptualizations; however, social location has been able to permeate popular culture as a singular concept as well. Through a social constructivist lens, social location holds value because it argues that identities are not fixed (Goodman, 2014). This challenges the positivist assumptions of identity, and

incorporates a broader understanding of how we understand the self in relation to identity, rather than the self *as* identity.

My own epistemological background comes largely out of feminist thought: queer theory. Queer theory originated in feminist thinking through theorists' works such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Eve Sedgewick-Kosovsky's *Epistemology of the Closet*, and other influential scholars in the field of gender studies. Ultimately, queer theory seeks to disrupt hetero- and cissexist, heteronormative assumptions imbedded and socialized within a given culture or society. It challenges binaries of thinking (ex. male vs. female, gay vs. straight), and underlines the fluidity of identities within the self (Goodman, 2014). As a queer person, this is a theoretical framework within which a broader understanding of myself, as well as the world around me can take place. Take, for instance, the intersection of my class background. As mentioned by a participant of Burnes and Singh's (2016) study, I often find myself "gay in the bank and queer on the street" (p. 60). Which is to say, so often our identities intersect and must be (re-)evaluated in contextual situations—especially when it comes to class, wherein LGBTQ+ identities are often constructed within a middle class paradigm. Using queer theory in this example, it becomes easier to identify otherwise non-queer spaces such as bookshops, coffee shops, and bars as inherently queer, class-based settings through which queer people meet each other over the exchange of capital.

Clearly, class, feminism, critical theory and the intersectionalities therein all interact with each other to create a personal epistemic background. As a student counsellor, an understanding of this is essential, especially in the service of marginalized groups. It is necessary to discuss this in relation to the Multitheoretical Psychotherapy model, as this can provide a strong backing through which to negotiate the aspects of such theories that work for me, as well as providing these theorists with an opportunity to grow their concepts through critique and the needs of those practicing. What now follows is an integrative approach to the MTP model and my own background.

Interaction of the Models

As it has been mentioned previously, the Multitheoretical Psychotherapy model incorporates seven key psychological schools of thought. While a complete analysis of the integration between a critical, feminist, queer epistemology and MTP is outside of the scope of this paper, I will argue here that this framework works well with the Systemic-Constructivist concepts, and Multicultural-Feminist concepts from Brooks-Harris' conceptualization of the psychotherapy. Specifically, I argue here that a critical feminist/queer reading of these concepts offer a more complete understanding therein, while also building on them with up-to-date terminology, critical scholarship, and best practices. First, I will discuss and unpack the integration of these two concepts, and then offer concluding thoughts on what has been reflected here.

Systemic-Constructivist

According to Brooks-Harris, the systemic-constructivist model focuses on family structures, including their roles and patterns. It incorporates social systems into the therapeutic alliance by acknowledging how these systems shape the construction of personal meaning for clients. It also considers personal narratives that may support change—lending itself to strengths-based philosophies of counselling in this regard. To this extent, the systemic concept in this model is largely influenced by Family Systems Theory (see Bowen, 1976, 1978), which emphasized that people must be understood in their social contexts, rather than in isolation. Before continuing, a brief queer reading of the systemic concept is necessary.

Family Systems Theory was developed at a point when the American queer movement was beginning to gain momentum. As queer theory has progressed from feminist thought into academia over the last several decades, a re-reading of these concepts are important. Family systems are often assumed to be nuclear, and while a movement away from this has been evident more recently, the assumption of families still leans toward one which is heteronormative (i.e. husband and wife) in nature. To take from a critical, postmodern rhetoric, then, we must acknowledge the socialization of heteronormativity and unpack our learning in order to fully understand how these assumptions are harmful to clients. It must be said that family systems, and consequently systemic models, must integrate a 'new normal,' wherein queer and trans families are expected and integrated. Using my own epistemic background, a more representative application of the model can be understood, as opposed to the current narratives within counselling literature, which suggest that diversity and inclusion of out-group experiences are to be left to the individual counsellor. Failure to do so can ultimately lead to alienation of such vulnerable populations, and can deny access to counselling services by excluding these groups in their base competencies.

Moving on from this, one must also consider the role of the institution in the systems through which each of us operate. That is to say, the space itself acts as a co-creator, or third entity, in the therapeutic alliance (Hansbury & Bennett, 2014), which ultimately shifts the construction of meaning as posited by Brooks-Harris. Within the context of social systems and constructivism more broadly, it is essential to account for the institution, which has been historically absent in psychological discourse. Employing a postmodern reflection here would benefit the integration of the MTP model through the awareness afforded to a deeper understanding of space, time, and context. An integration of critical thought would allow for a relationship-oriented approach which accounts for the ways through which people, again, can have access to counselling services. To avoid conflating this point, I mean to suggest that the institutional space through which counselling practice operates plays a role within the system of functioning for potential clients. Awareness of power in relation to this needs to be considered more fully in order to truly remove barriers and grant access to all clients. For example, a child who has gone through the social welfare system for many years is likely not to respond well to a counsellor within a social work facility—the space itself representing the institutional power and oppression experienced by the child. A critical disposition engenders this understanding, and should therefore be integrated within the Multitheoretical Psychotherapy model.

When considering the constructivist side of the systemic-constructivist concept, it is important to understand the relationship to social construction itself. Checkel (1999) writes that social construction is understood outside of traditional methodologies of social learning. It is a process which necessitates a social body, including institutions, in order to develop norms or discursive structures through which social learning is perpetuated. Using a Foucauldian analysis of the concept, power operates through who is able to create and perpetuate this social learning (often through mass-media mediums). I argue that the understanding of power as a macroconcept is essential for counsellors who seek to integrate systemic-constructivist concepts into practice.

Within practice, constructivism takes the form of a constant interpretation and negotiation of the social world (Goodman, 2014). Relaying this back to the idea of social location, or locational feminism, we can understand that an individual's narrative is shaped by this interpretation and negotiation, and that this is a fluid, or constant, process as we develop more experiences. Due to this fact, we must acknowledge that world views, as Brooks-Harris may define it, must be put in relation to everything else. That is to say, we are constantly in relation to one another, and thus we develop our own social realities.

Brooks-Harris uses the constructivist theory in order to consider how the counsellor may use client narratives to support change. We need to consider that such an understanding comes from both the experiences of the client as well as the counsellor (Hansbury & Bennett, 2014). A feminist epistemology embraces a holistic practice and complements this process by inviting the counsellor to consider how they are implicated as an active participant in the client's care. It accomplishes this feat, in part, due to the process involved in (counter-)transference.

Considering transference through a social constructivist lens, it can be defined as a construction of a concealed past (Takemura, 2011). Power is accounted for within feminist thought in acknowledging the dynamics of transference, and accounting for how this power differential is demonstrated within the alliance. For example, a client begins to assess the counsellor before they even meet (Hansbury & Bennett, 2014). If the waiting room where the client sits does not reflect their experiences, such as a rainbow or trans flag, they may be less receptive, or more defensive, to the counsellor's probes and invitations. Before the counsellor can begin to assess the narratives that may support client change, the transference in the relationship can already be a barrier that must be addressed. A feminist integration would further subvert the androcentric view of transference, by underlining the gendered lens through which current social systems operate.

Clearly, there is much to be considered in Multitheoretical Psychotherapy. Without this epistemic integration, there are several nuances that are missed, which may lead to dysfunction within the therapeutic alliance. Systemic and constructivist concepts must be considered outside of the reductionist rhetoric offered by Brooks-Harris, and so must be recognized here. Continuing from this concept is the integration of my epistemology with the Multicultural-Feminist counselling concept offered in the MTP model.

Multicultural(-Feminist)

Brooks-Harris uses the term 'multicultural' in his conceptualization, and 'multicultural-feminist' elsewhere, and so these should be understood as interchangeable theories within this model. While I have already discussed feminist thought in some detail, the emphasis here will be on the multicultural concept as positioned within MTP.

The foundation of multicultural psychotherapy is to provide ethical and competent services for all peoples (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). It includes the various social locations implicit in identity, but it can be further informed by an intersectional feminist perspective, if applied more vigorously. The Mutltitheoretical model uses locational feminism (Enns, 201) in this regard, but it is limited in scope, and practice is restricted to broad-based concepts of diversity, spirituality, oppression, and identity. In essence, it utilizes an anti-oppression framework and can service counsellors and clients by allowing them to explore marginal identities; however, it often fails to go much further than this. Brooks-Harris uses the multicultural concept in psychotherapeutic practice in order to identify cultural messages in relation to a client's presenting concern, explore identity development, understand a client's worldview, and generate ideas about cultural practices and values which may support the therapeutic goals (Brooks-Harris, 2008).

A critical, feminist epistemology can especially inform and enhance the scholarship evident in the multicultural concept. Specifically, it can access up-to-date research within the fields of social work, and critical race, obesity, and gender theories, which may provide invaluable opportunities for practitioner development. This aspect is important to note here as we have only recently adopted postmodern

thought into research scholarship, and as such, active inclusion of marginalized groups, through methods such as narrative inquiry, have been limited. As out-groups historically have had minimal access to institutions of higher education, this has created a multitude of research in the last several decades to address the gaps and needs of such communities. As the MTP model was published in 2007-2008, a decade of research has since past within the landscape of social sciences and the humanities. Unlike other disciplines, research within a five-year span is often considered outdates, and necessitates an updated review.

An example of this is necessary to underline the importance of updated research. Microaggression literature has been present for several decades, but only really popular within mainstream academic discourse in the last decade. Microaggressions refer to the subtle indignities, whether intentional or not, which people are subjected to through their environment, or verbal, or physical means (Derald et al., 2007). Popularized by Derald Wing Sue (2010) and others (see also Nadel et al., 2015; 2016), microaggression research has spanned race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and so on. As a counsellor under the MTP model, then, it is important to understand microaggressions in contextualizing a client's experiences, and understanding cultural messages that one has been exposed to. As the needs of more and more marginalized communities are addressed, psychological literature must also be updated, and having a critical epistemic worldview will be essential in addressing this need, as it allows for the challenging and questioning of existing theories and methods.

Finally, feminist epistemology can further address the needs of Brooks-Harris within the multicultural-feminist concept by providing counsellors with the knowledge and ability to create spaces that allow clients the freedom of expression without the invalidation often experienced by marginalized groups with (in-group) counsellors. In doing so, it can allow clients and counsellors to understand their own social contexts, while correcting the hidden bias' that are ingrained in traditional therapies developed by in-group scholars. Clearly, feminist, critical thought works well and can be integrated with the Multitheoretical Psychotherapy model in order to deliver a more comprehensive, client-oriented experience.

Conclusion

Counsellor identity can be thought of as the integration of professional ethics and virtues into the self—a collection of experiences, training, and theories which come together in a unique and personal way. When we consider counsellor identity, we should think about the various diverse experiences that we all possess within the field of psychology and counselling in general. In saying this, it was my hope to connect with this idea of individual counsellor identity within academic discourse, and position myself somewhere within this integration of the two. I argued that the role of theory is not perfect, but useful in providing support which serves many communities and people. While theory will always lag behind the realities of front-line workers and groups, it is a necessary component in a holistic care. I argued that my own background within a critical, feminist framework offered a different perspective for Multitheoretical Psychotherapy specifically, but this was placed within context of Systemic-Constructivist, and Multicultural-Feminist, which are arguably my strengths. I do not come from a background of cognitive or psychodynamic leanings, and as such my epistemic background can complement the theory insofar that it offers critique and expertise in an area which may not have been considered. Ultimately, it is the counsellor's role within the therapeutic alliance, and how they interact with theory that predicts positive outcomes for clients and the community at large.

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