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LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
School of Behavioral Health
in conjunction with the
Faculty of Graduate Studies

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# Developmental Pedagogy in Marriage and Family Therapy Education

by

Christopher Russell Hoff

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A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Marital and Family Therapy

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June 2016

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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this dissertation in his/her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree Doctor of Philosophy.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| ANT | Actor-Network Theory |
| MFT | Marriage and Family Therapy |
| ZPD | Zone of Proximal Development |

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Developmental Pedagogy in Marriage and Family Therapy Education

by

Christopher Russell Hoff

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Marital and Family Therapy
Loma Linda University, June 2016
Dr. Brian Distelberg, Chairperson

New practice domains are opening up for practitioners of family therapy in the medical, organizational, and human relations fields. In this new environment, family therapy educators and supervisors are required to cross the epistemological spaces of scientist-practitioner, postmodernism, and critical theory. These new possibilities require that family therapist educators become comfortable moving between multiple epistemologies. This poses increasing challenges that will require a hybridization of knowledge and practice approaches in MFT education.

Through focus groups consisting of 34 participants, all of who were in their first quarter of a Master's degree program in Marriage and Family Therapy. We found a rich set of themes that reflect the experiences of students in their first quarter of learning multiple, potentially contradictory theories. The data that emerged reflect both the deep and varied *student experiences* that took place as they were introduced to multiple perspectives in their first quarter, as well as *student desires* that they would have liked to have had met during their experience. The results in each of these areas uniquely inform potential future MFT pedagogical practices.

*Keywords*: pedagogy, epistemology, family therapy, narrative analysis

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of Marriage and Family Therapy education should be to prepare professionals to lead and expand the discipline of Marriage and Family Therapy theoretically, clinically, and scholarly in an increasingly diverse, integrated, and dynamic world (Woolley, 2010). Over a time span of about seven decades, the field of Family Therapy has generated many new ideas, methods, and approaches as contexts have changed (Neden, 2011). It could be argued that Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) teaching and learning is now being confronted with new "incommensurate discourses" (Neden & Burnham, 2007, p. 359) as both teachers and learners are required to navigate the competing epistemologies that are commonly taught in most MFT programs. This schism is made more apparent as the field begins to "draw lines in the sand" and defend positions that include the belief that it is impossible to integrate theories across epistemologies (Dickerson, 2010). Or the belief that if MFT programs are to effectively integrate theory, advance existing theories, develop new relational theories, and expand clinical skills and scholarship, MFT education must ensure that students preferably master several MFT theories and models (Woolley, 2010).

As the field of Marriage and Family Therapy continues to experience growth in non-traditional domains of practice like organizational development and training, medical family therapy, and conflict resolution and mediation, MFT education is confronting a major shift. This hybridization of the field, and lack of clear direction, is beginning to challenge existing programs of study. In this new context where traditional boundaries are evaporating, teachers and learners must become 'bi-lingual' in multiple ontologies

and disciplines. In this environment Ken Gergen (2009) suggests a new approach to education that allows a way to transcend traditional disciplinary and epistemological walls of containment, and began to find ways to foster "creative cross-talk" (Gergen, 2009, p. 218) between disciplines and epistemologies. Unfortunately this new approach suggested by Gergen (2009) remains elusive as there has been very little written about the impact of teaching from the modernist, postmodernist, and critical theory epistemologies simultaneously taught in most Marriage and Family Therapy programs. It is also unknown how those positioned as MFT students are experiencing these opposing epistemologies, or how and why future Marriage and Family Therapists come to a decision to adopt a particular theoretical stance, and if these epistemological positions can be transcended based on context.

In this research proposal I will identify multiple conceptual frameworks and strategies for teaching masters level MFT theory, which apply directly to contemporary family therapy trainee development. Driven by student experiences brought forward in the research, I will also introduce a framework for a developmental pedagogy that will support MFT learners as they get introduced to, begin to integrate, and eventually blend these seemingly differing epistemologies.

## Background

There has been very little written about the impact of teaching from the competing epistemologies of postmodernism, critical theory (critical pedagogy), and modernism (scientist-practitioner) in the practice of family therapy.

A review of the literature shows that the postmodern concept of collaborative learning is being explored in many settings, with many types of approaches (Stride, Daly

& Jackson, 2010). Even with these expanding efforts of bringing postmodern approaches to the classroom, students experience ambivalence towards postmodernism, both in the therapeutic context and in the classroom, and have difficulty adopting this theory as they attempt to adjust to this different form of thinking (Stride et al., 2010).

The teaching and training of family therapists in critical theory is not without similar challenges. The literature points out the importance of creatively engaging students and facilitating open conversations in the classroom, in the therapy room, and in life about the relevance of the larger socio-cultural context to our work (Esmiol, Knudson-Martin & Delgado, 2012). To ask students to set aside the stability of the familiar in favor of practices of critique may not appeal unless it is an interest they hold, and because of the potential for destabilization, this effort will require a deliberate effort from both the teacher and learner (Marsten & Howard, 2006).

More recently in family therapy education, there has been a revisiting of the consistent call for a scientist-practitioner model of MFT education (Crane, Wampler, Sprenkle, Sandberg & Hovestadt, 2002; Karam & Sprenkle 2010; Lee III & Nichols, 2010; Wampler, 2010). In an environment where nearly three-quarters of MFT students are masters level, and typically clinically focused, this model can prove to be a challenging match (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). The suggested alternative to this dilemma is to shift to a "research informed" perspective as opposed to the scientist-practitioner framework for clinically oriented MFT master's programs (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010).

Even with a shift to the research informed framework there are still many challenges ahead for this model of MFT education. While proponents of the research informed model decry the false dichotomy between research and practice and art and

science, they still call for more rigorous standards supporting this ideology and suggest increased support and enforcement from both COAMFTE and AAMFT (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). To MFT educators and practitioners that teach from the postmodern and critical lens, there is a concern that this shift and privileging of the research informed approach will adversely affect the development of new theory and broad-based clinical skills, and students will not be prepared to lead the field through training MFTs (Woolley, 2010).

## Objective

Critical academic discourse is based on and grounded in disagreement and many of us educated in western school systems have been trained to think in disconnectionist terms, to look for differences (Keating, 2013). This antagonistic foundation continues to create barriers to developing creative compromises, or generate innovative hybrid perspectives that draw from different points of view, locking us into reactionary and oppositional stances that harm us as students, teachers, scholars, and colleagues (Keating, 2013).

This study intends to examine teaching and learning in family therapy education through student experiences as they are introduced to multiple epistemological perspectives, in an effort to map a course toward new pedagogical practices in the family therapy field. This study will examine the process, discourse, and patterns that emerge for students participating in a family therapy program.

The following set of overarching questions will frame the study:

a. Through narrative analysis, what student experiences stood out as they were introduced to multiple perspectives that include scientist-practitioner,

critical theory, and postmodernism/social constructionism in the practice of family therapy?

b. What skills can teachers develop as students navigate multiple, often conflicting, epistemological stances?

c. What patterns and preferences with regard to the teaching and learning process emerged as the study progressed, and how can these findings inform new pedagogical practice

## Rationale

Family therapy has moved out of the clinic and into hospitals, medical centers, business organizations, courts, and school systems (Lee, III & Nichols, 2010). As the field expands into these new domains, MFT educators will be challenged to develop new ways to educate and train competent therapists, mediators, and consultants. In the midst of these new demands, the most critical task for marriage and family therapy educators is a shift in pedagogy (Gehart, 2011). Because of these new opportunities for MFT learners, the latest COAMFTE accreditation standards, and the move to MFT core competencies, adopting a contemporary pedagogical model is of paramount importance at this time (Gehart, 2011). This study will be helpful by using thematic narrative analysis of students' experience to offer a framework for teaching masters students seemingly conflicting MFT theories and provide a map for practice for both teachers and learners seeking to do this complex work.

# CHAPTER 2

## CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

There has been little written about the impact of teaching from the competing epistemologies of postmodernism, critical theory (critical pedagogy), and modernism (scientist-practitioner) in the practice of family therapy. To begin to explore how students are experiencing these different epistemologies, a robust set of conceptual lenses will be required. This study will be guided conceptually by social constructionist thought, actor-network theory and Vygotsky's educational theory.

One of the central premises of social construction is the acknowledgement of multiple perspectives and the detachment from a particular view about what might be effective in the classroom, in order to generate new meanings and understandings (Philp, Guy & Lowe, 2007). Situating the research in a social constructionist lens shifts the emphasis from individual knowers to the collaborative construction of knowledge and draws attention to the quality of relationships, between teachers and students, among students, and between the classroom and the surrounding world (Gergen, 1999).

Bearing traces of systems theory, actor-network theory (ANT) is not as concerned with the individual but rather the patterns of relations among persons and how various technologies are embedded in broader *networks* of events (Gergen, 2009). For example, many systems theorists are only concerned with the casual relations within a single class of entities (Gergen, 2009). However ANT differs in that it seeks to relate elements across classes and treats human actions, discourse, text books, geographic locations, etc., as interacting participants in the system (Gergen, 2009). The ANT approach will allow this study to track humans and non-humans (text books, syllabi, etc.) in relation with one

another and how this plays out in the classroom. ANT rather than document the stable transcendence into a single ontology or epistemological position (or truth), is interested in making visible the problems and enactments during the enrollments of multiple ways of knowing, and how different knowledges exist simultaneously (Fenwick & Hardwick, 2010). In an era where experiential and inter-disciplinary approaches to learning are being encouraged, the educational implications for the family therapy field are becoming increasingly important.

Vygotsky's educational theory will be an important lens for this study because at the heart of Vygotsky's theory lies the understanding that human cognition and learning is social and cultural rather than an individual phenomena (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev and Miller, 2003). This lens is important because Vygotsky prompts us to inquire into the nature of knowledge used in the classroom, and the relationships among students, teachers, and knowledge (Kozulin, et al. 2003). Vygotsky's educational theory will guide this study in its examination of the primacy of a developmental or dialectical perspective; the plurality of cultural practices, social relations, and symbol systems in the mediation and development of thinking; and the importance of individual agency in the formation of particular subjectivities in marriage and family therapy education (Moll, 2014).

## Social Constructionism – Emerging Hybrids

Social constructionism posits that knowledge is both relational and co-constructed. Social constructionism in education draws our attention to the quality of relationships, between teachers and learners, among learners, between the classroom and the surrounding world, and what is gained and lost in the pragmatics and politics of education (Gergen, 2009). In this spirit, social constructionism will guide this study's

approach in the classroom in an attempt to foster collaboration and help learners to begin to live together in a world of difference and conflicting realities.

According to Gergen (2009) educators of the social constructionist mindset use dialogue, rather than monologue, as the chief instrument of education. These educators emphasize: 1) expanding the domain of participation, and not allowing a few opinionated students from dominating, 2) reducing control over the direction of conversations, so that students passions are positioned on par with those of the teacher, 3) crediting students with respect as opposed to correcting them, 4) replacing the goal of truth with the possibilities of multiple realities. This dialogic orientation will be the preferred teaching stance while conducting the study.

Besides collaboration, constructionist educators also favor polyvocal expression and critical reflection. Constructionist educators explore means of facilitating ways in which students can develop multiple voices, forms of expression, or ways of putting things (Gergen, 2009). Constructionist educators are also interested in critical pedagogy. However, constructionist educators in their emphasis on increasing critical deliberation are careful not to simply impose another ideology on learners (Gergen, 2009). Constructionist educators hope to move the dialogue beyond just critique, helping students appreciate positive aspects of existing traditions (Gergen, 2009).

The family therapy field has experienced growth in non-traditional domains of practice like organizational development and training, medical family therapy, and conflict resolution and mediation. This hybridization of the field is beginning to challenge existing programs of study. Because traditional boundaries are evaporating and teachers and learners must become ‘bi-lingual’ in multiple ontologies and disciplines,

knowledge-making is confronting a major shift. The social constructionist approach allows a way to transcend traditional disciplinary and epistemological walls of containment, and began to find ways to foster "creative cross-talk" between disciplines and epistemologies (Gergen, 2009, p. 218). Using a social constructionism lens, coupled with narrative analysis, will allow an investigation into the ways in which events, processes and qualities are presented and modeled in language, and how descriptions of what is real are made, passed on and change through time (Owen, 1995).

## Actor-Network Theory – Tracing the Network

In family therapy, there is very little literature studying the practices of teaching and learning from multiple epistemological positions. In education, there is no shortage of discussion of teaching and learning, and there is no shortage of theories attempting to understand and explain these practices (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Theories contrast between the individualist approaches of behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructionism, and approaches that are identified as more social and situated like communities of practice, cultural historical activity theory, and practice-based learning theory (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Actor-network theory is not a theory of learning, but rather an attempt to explore how the social is enacted (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010).

Most of the discourses surrounding teaching and learning in family therapy are based in the social and practice focused theories of the modernist, postmodern or critical/Marxist perspective. Professors today can find themselves teaching a class on postmodern/contemporary family therapy, and later in the day instructing trainees in the use of the DSM 5. Students in family therapy programs also consistently experience this same *problem of difference* in knowledges as their professors.

So how do both teachers and learners struggle with this *problem of difference*? It is understood that multiple ontologies are not equally powerful and that one will eventually dominate the other. In other words, one approach will "win over" the teacher and the learner. ANT-orientated approaches provides an 'interstanding' of what happens when dominant knowledge attempts to control a weaker knowledge (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). In this effort ANT research attends to the following dimensions (Fenwick & Edwards (2010):

- *Symmetry* – treating human (teacher preferences) and non-human (text books, syllabi, etc.) elements as equally interesting, important and capable of exerting force upon each other as they come together.
- *Translation* – examining how individual things connect, partially connect or fail to connect to form nets or webs of activity, and examining how these things change through their connection.
- *Network assemblages* – attempting to trace the multiple networks at work in and outside the classroom, how they came to be enacted and what works holds them together despite blockages and counter networks.
- *Multiplicity* – allowing for multiple ontologies and the relations among them, rather than explanations relying on multiple perspectives.
- *Ambivalence* – tracing the contradictions and uncertainties within and among these networks.

## Vygotsky's Educational Theory

Lev Vygotsky, born in 1896, was a Russian psychologist who studied child

development and learning. Although he only worked as a psychologist for 10 years, education was a critical area of concern (Moll, 2014). Three primary and related themes that characterize Vygotsky's cultural-historical approach to education include (Moll, 2014):

- Higher mental processes, such as problem solving and voluntary attention, have a social origin.
- Human thinking must be understood developmentally (historically), at both the individual and cultural level.
- Mediational means of various kinds are crucial in human social and psychological development.

A fourth theme that could be included is that: Active subjects create themselves through their social actions (Moll, 2014). This idea is important to this study's intention to map student experiences in family therapy education and how students work across epistemologies because Vygotsky's educational theory moves away from the common idea that human development is the progressive socialization of the individual, but rather a process of progressive individuation, understanding that peoples' worlds are social from the beginning (Moll, 2014). It is this sort of progressive individuation that this study plans to map by looking at how family therapy learners come to understand epistemologies and manage potentially contradictory frameworks.

The term *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) is probably the most widely recognized and well-known ideas associated with Vygotsky's educational theory (Chaiklin, 2003). According to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development is the distance between a person's actual level of ability, as reflected in independent problem-

solving, and their potential level of development, as determined during task performance in collaboration with older or more capable peers (i.e. scaffolding) (Ramey, Tarulli, Frijters & Fisher, 2009). The *zone of proximal development* was used by Vygotsky to not only analyze the functional transformations brought about by socio-individual development, but to also emphasize a subject's active nature in their relations within the given (structured) environment (Moll, 2014).

Some perspectives and implications that the idea of *zone of proximal development* and *scaffolding* will bring to this study include:

- A focus on maturing psychological functions, rather than already existing functions (Chaiklin, 2003).
- Learning, even in the here and now, involves larger social and institutional arrangements that are shaped by social positioning or rank of people (Moll, 2014).
- Pedagogical work is always linked to the broader social world (Moll, 2014).
- A focus on the interdependence of the process of development (in a MFT program for example) and the socially provided resources for that development (Moll, 2014).

Contrasting what family therapy students can do independently, with what they can accomplish with assistance by way of the *zone of proximal development*, provides a dynamic perspective of family therapy student's capabilities and can further serve to guide teaching (Moll, 2014).

## Conclusion

Whether we are referring to the practices of discourse and reasoning that have come to define different forms of education, or how students, through their lived experiences accumulate and make sense of knowledge, education is always a cultural process (Moll, 2014). This study seeks to understand student experiences as they are introduced to multiple epistemological perspectives, and the discourses and cultural processes that operate in family therapy education. The three conceptual frameworks presented offer a set of lenses that will allow a closer examination of how family therapy learners approach and adopt competing theories and knowledges. Adopting these three frameworks also is congruent with the spirit of the study and supports and encourages a synthesis of scientist-practitioner approaches, critical theory and postmodern practices in the classroom. Adopting these three conceptual approaches in the study of family therapy education will contextualize the cultural experiences of students in family therapy programs, and support the emergence of a hybridization of teaching and learning in family therapy education, leading to the development of new pedagogies of possibilities.

# CHAPTER 3

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Because no single model of teaching can capture and respond to the complexity and nuances of the teaching–learning process, particularly in a field such as MFT. This section summarizes pedagogical best practices, educational interventions, and training recommendations across the various MFT teaching approaches by MFT opinion leaders, and analysis of published case studies.

## Postmodern Pedagogy

Postmodern pedagogy speaks of a worldview rather than a "model" or "theory" per se, and this worldview is explicit not just in the *content* of the teaching but also in the *process* of teaching (Pare & Tarragona, 2006). In the effort to privilege process over content, postmodern educators have adopted several concepts and stances to bring postmodern family therapy approaches to life. These approaches and stances can take the main forms of collaboration, critical inquiry and attention to context in the classroom.

### *Collaboration*

The collaboration emphasis in postmodern pedagogy challenges the traditional hierarchal structure of the professor as educator and student as learner (Stride et al., 2010). A popular way postmodern educators flatten this hierarchal structure is through the use of learning communities (Gehart, 2007; Stride et al., 2010). The learning community approach, which involves "learning by doing", has been shown to improve student engagement and performance and promote higher levels of learning and reasoning (Gehart, 2007; Stride et al., 2010). These learning communities can take

several forms but all believe every voice matters and the learning environment is enhanced by the inclusion of multiple perspectives. In this effort the postmodern educator's role is to form a collaborative relationship and assist students in becoming proactive in developing shared goals for the classroom (Gehart, 2007; Stride et al., 2010).

### *Critical Inquiry*

Postmodern pedagogical practices emerge from a critique of the status quo and often take the form of a mutual and critical deconstruction of taken for granted and unexamined ideas about persons and problems (Pare & Tarragona, 2006). Postmodern pedagogy takes issue with any overarching explanations of knowing whether humanist, feminist, Christian, capitalist, or critical theoretical and instead focuses on multiple and local forms of truth (Kilgore, 2004). With postmodern critical inquiry comes a reconfiguration of how learners think they know the world and the postmodern educator can then encourage differing forms of the meaning, language and thought MFT learners may bring to the classroom, without expecting them to conform to dominant cultural patterns or teacher authority (Kilgore, 2004). Critical inquiry and reflection in postmodern pedagogy can help MFT students to evaluate the theories and assumptions that inform family therapy practice, take up multiple perspectives, and become agents of social change (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006).

### *Attention to Context*

Postmodern pedagogy includes the recognition that MFT education is a situated, collective learning process embedded in difference (Kilgore, 2004). A postmodern

pedagogy would have MFT educators go public with differences, thoughts, opinions, and administrative practices (Gehart, 2007). This willingness by the postmodern educator to situate themselves within their own social location, acknowledging the institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic trajectories of their lives allows for the questioning, critiquing, and sometimes even rejection of the social positions of teacher and student (Kilgore, 2004). This openness by the postmodern instructor is important for reducing the natural hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship and facilitating a more collaborative process (Gehart, 2007).

## Critical Pedagogy

Contemporary MFT education is paying greater attention to both cultural and critical consciousness and how to teach transformation to MFT learners. The development of critical and cultural consciousness enables MFT learners to recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006).

Unlike the postmodern pedagogy, which also values critical inquiry, the development of critical and cultural consciousness in critical pedagogy is more action based with intent of liberation. Paulo Freire (1970) wrote that cultural action is always a systemic and deliberate form of action and that it aims at surmounting the antagonistic contradictions of the social structure, thereby achieving the liberation of human beings. Teachers of critical pedagogy in MFT programs believe that the failure to address diversity and social justice issues contributes to continued oppression of traditionally marginalized groups through ineffective and/or harmful therapeutic interventions (Garcia, Kosutic, McDowell & Anderson, 2009).

Critical pedagogy offers students and educators new forms of agency and useful tools enabling them to examine and deconstruct the dominating culture's oppressive discourse (Keating, 2007). These tools can take the main forms of dialogical practice, critical consciousness, and social justice in clinical practice.

### *Dialogical Practice*

MFT programs have long relied on the banking account model of education. The banking account model of education was described by Paulo Freire (1970) as "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (pg. 72). The dialogical approach counters the banking account and lecture model by favoring dialogue and open communication among students (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006). Nylund & Tilsen (2006) use the dialogical method to situate their roles as teachers as "participant mangers" (pg. 23) of classroom conversations and keep classroom conversations moving along by drawing on the unique knowledges and diversity of the learners multiple perspectives. Critical pedagogy believes that social transformation begins with dialogue and by using language they can make visible hidden systems of power, privilege and oppression, beginning a critical transformation towards liberation (Almeida, Hernandez-Wolfe & Tubbs, 2011).

### *Critical Consciousness*

Critical pedagogy believes that acquiring a critical contextual perspective can inform therapeutic decisions in ways that raise social awareness and support social equity (Garcia & McDowell, 2010). Critical pedagogy challenges MFT learners to examine their

own biases, assumptions, and cultural worldviews that contribute to social inequalities/inequities, and to begin to develop alliances and strategies that promote social justice (Garcia, Kosutic, McDowell & Anderson, 2009). Critical pedagogy believes that in raising critical consciousness in MFT learners they will in turn develop therapist competence by diminishing the possibilities of further oppression of clients in assessment and treatment, validating of clients experiences, helping clients navigate multiple systems of care and resist systemic oppression, and recognizing and challenging personal biases (Garcia et al., 2009).

### *Social Justice in Clinical Practice*

Few graduate level training programs have found effective ways to interconnect the ways that power, privilege, and oppression can be addressed in clinical practice with couples and families (Parker, 2009). Critical pedagogy posits that a social justice perspective requires that family therapists make visible in the therapeutic setting larger socio/cultural systems and discourses that may be producing oppression and that family therapists must continually examine their own social locations. Critical pedagogy asks that MFT learners attend to presenting therapeutic issues by addressing the specific interplay of power, privilege, and oppression in family and community life (Almeida, Hernandez-Wolfe & Tubbs, 2011).

## Research-Informed Pedagogy

There is an increasing consensus in MFT education that the curriculum in MFT programs are out of date with an overemphasis on older theories that defined the profession and an underemphasis on newer evidence-based treatments (Wampler, 2010).

From this critique of MFT programs there has been a call for a more balanced approach to MFT education where deficits in research training are understood and the gap between clinical research and practice is bridged in an effort to improve the quality of education in MFT programs (Wampler, 2010, Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). In an effort to integrate research into MFT programs while remaining clinical in focus, best practices could include adopting a research-informed perspective, measuring client progress and outcomes, and directly involving students in research.

### *Research-Informed Perspective*

The research informed perspective is concerned with integrating research and practice while avoiding the "either/or" split that seems to put researchers and clinicians into two oppositional camps (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). Unlike the scientist-practitioner model where the MFT learner is trained to develop new and original research, the research-informed perspective is interested in training MFT learners to integrate existing knowledge into their clinical practices (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). Some approaches the MFT educator can use in the effort to develop a research-informed perspective include; share how research informs their clinical work, show how non-clinical research findings relevant to MFT can be used to help clients in session, and teach how to critically evaluate relevant research findings form multiple perspectives (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010).

### *Measuring Client Progress and Outcomes*

It is easy for MFT students to get captured by the variety of new learnings in MFT

programs such as scholarship, social justice, critical theory, and the innovative ways of understanding the human condition, and forget that the discipline of MFT is about helping the people that consult with us improve their lives and access lasting positive change through relationships (Wooley, 2010). In the effort to make sure clients are making progress, and to reduce the divide between researchers and clinicians, measuring client progress is becoming an important part of standard clinical practice (Stith, 2014). Progress research is valuable to MFT education and the research-informed perspective because it gives MFT learners firsthand insight into the change process of their clients and employs instruments that are both research and clinical tools (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). By incorporating progress research in MFT education, faculty can model how research, in addition to theory, can guide clinical decision making (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010).

### *Direct Involvement in Research*

It is essential to the advancement of the field that a wide variety of scholarship continues on the unique contextual, relational approaches of the MFT field (Wooley, 2010). If MFT learners get involved in conducting qualitative and quantitative research, writing grant proposals and papers, and developing, integrating, and advancing theory, they will become more informed and passionate consumers of research, even if they do not choose a career in research (Stith, 2014; Woolley, 2010).

## Developmental Pedagogy in MFT

As stated earlier there has been very little written about the impact of teaching from the competing epistemologies of postmodernism, critical theory (critical pedagogy),

and modernism (scientist-practitioner) in the practice of family therapy. The destabilization that occurs as an MFT learner shifts from one way of knowing to a more complex way of knowing can be painful and frustrating (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009; Marsten & Howard, 2006). I think I can be helpful here by presenting a framework for best practices for teaching masters students seemingly conflicting MFT theories. This new framework integrates the holding environment from the developmental constructivist perspective (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009) and scaffolding from Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

### *The Holding Environment*

While there are many useful aspects to Caldwell and Claxton's (2009) developmental-constructivist perspective, I am most interested in the concept of holding environments. The holding environment is the context in which, and out of which, a person grows and consists of three functions: (a) *confirming* persons where they are, (b) *contradicting*, which involves letting go or introducing other kinds of possibilities, and (c) creating *continuity* by remaining in place during the period of transformation and growth (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009).

In the context of an educational setting the holding environment provides several interlocking elements (Ward, 2008):

- A space where students are encouraged to explore the overlaps between personal, professional and intellectual learning;
- A safe space where that provides structure to prevent anxiety from taking over or running out of control, and to allow the anxiety to be examined and understood;

- A sense that the process of learning evolves through time towards change and within relationship;
- An understanding that strong emotions may arise from a re-examination of one's personal experience that these emotions will be respected, validated by both peers and instructors;
- An understanding that instructors will show care for student's sensitivities as well as concerns for their growth and learning.

The holding environment provides a map for MFT educators where they can recognize and give attention to the learners' present way of making meaning, then critique, reflect and possibly change taken for granted assumptions, and provide intellectual and emotional space for students as they try on new ways of thinking (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009). The holding environment allows both MFT teacher and learner to be more collaborative and attuned as these sometimes painful "growth spurts" take place as the learner is experiencing new ways of knowing. The holding environment is not just a safe space but a dynamic process where the aim is that students will learn directly from their own experience in the classroom of being appropriately "held" so that they may eventually offer similar holding in their respective practices and classrooms (Ward, 2008).

### *Scaffolding*

Lev Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist who developed the idea that the potential for cognitive development depends upon the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). Vygotsky emphasized that learning was not an achievement of independent

learning but rather social collaboration and that the ZPD bridges the gap of what is known and what is possible to know, and it is in this gap that learning happens (Ramey, Young & Tarulli, 2010). Scaffolding in the zone of proximal development is done by breaking down tasks into manageable steps which are structured at first but allow for gradual progression from collaborative to independent performance (Ramey et al., 2010).

For a student coming from a traditional undergraduate education where modernist or structuralist theories tend to dominate, into a MFT program that values collaboration and the pedagogical approaches discussed earlier, this change of learning culture can feel like getting launched from Vygotsky's *known and familiar* to the *possible to know* in an instant, missing all the learning that is to happen in the gap, often leaving the MFT learner frustrated and disappointed. Using Vygotsky's scaffolding approach, the role of the MFT educator would be to (Ramey et al., 2010): (a) make the MFT learners current base of knowledge more visible to the learner without them being fully defined by these concepts, (b) assist MFT learners in revising their relationships with base concepts and knowledge and (c) develop these concepts more richly and develop leading activities that will expand learning in new directions. The scaffolding approach to MFT education also gives MFT educators a map to further reduce the potentially painful and frustrating process of acquiring new knowledge.

## Conclusion

Family therapy has moved out of the clinic and into hospitals, medical centers, business organizations, courts, and school systems (Lee III & Nichols, 2010). As the field expands into these new domains, MFT educators will be challenged to develop new ways

to educate and train competent therapists, mediators, and consultants. In the midst of these new demands marriage and family therapy educators most critical task is a shift in pedagogy (Gehart, 2011). In the midst of these new opportunities for MFT learners, the latest COAMFTE accreditation standards, and the move to MFT core competencies, necessitates adopting a contemporary pedagogical model (Gehart, 2011).

The proposed remedy of adopting an integrated developmental pedagogy and taking best practices from seemingly oppositional epistemological approaches is a best practice approach to deal with both the expansion of the field into new domains and MFT education's move to a core competencies model of education.

# CHAPTER 4

# METHODOLOGY

This study intends to examine teaching and learning in family therapy education, in an effort to map a course toward new pedagogical practices in the family therapy field. This study will examine the process, discourse, and patterns that emerge for students participating in a family therapy program. The goal of the dissertation is to lead to multiple publishable papers.

## Data Collection

Data will be collected via focus groups with students enrolled in courses that introduce students to varying epistemologies that guide case conceptualization and practice in marital and family therapy/counseling. Focus groups will address the teaching and learning experience of the students.

Focus group research is used widely in a variety of disciplines to understand group perspectives on a particular issue (Daly, 2007). One of the benefits of focus groups is that they allow for multiple voices to be heard at one sitting, drawing a larger sample into smaller data collection events (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Another benefit to focus group research is that, like interviews, focus groups allow participants a role in shaping the research and can be used to expose the differences, contradictions, unique experiences, views, perceptions and attitudes expressed by different group members (Winlow, Simm, Marvell & Schaaf, 2013). Some other strengths of focus groups research in MFT education can be student empowerment and a greater understanding and empathy for the objectives and challenges of MFT teaching and learning. Focus groups can also

allow researchers to level power dynamics because participants prompt each other, and focus groups are "synergistic" because they allow participants to elaborate and build on contributions of others in the group (Daly, 2007).

## *Design - Setting Up a Focus Group*

### Role of the Researcher

In focus group research the researcher's role is to be a moderator. The role of the moderator includes ensuring that all topics are covered, using prompts where required, ensuring that all participants have a chance to comment on each question, and picking up on issues raised by participants (Winlow et al., 2013). The role of the moderator is to guide the discussions when needed and to be sensitive to power relations so that participation is encouraged from all members (Winlow et al., 2013).

### Interview Guide

Focus group research design suggests the use of an interview guide which includes the key topics of discussion, which will be linked to research aims, and, secondly, careful consideration of wording, useful key phrases and the sequencing of questions (Winlow et al., 2013). The interview guide is useful to ensure that there is consistency across the various focus groups in the way that you treat them (Breen, 2006).

### Sampling Strategy

People are usually brought into a focus group because of some specialized or shared knowledge, so recruitment typically follows the principle of purposive sampling,

where individuals are identified based on specific experiences or characteristics (Daly, 2007). In an educational context purposeful sampling, or natural group, may be of greater value than a random sample, and guidance on focus group size suggests using between 5-12 participants (Winlow, et al., 2013).

**Focus Group Management**

Some other considerations when conducting focus group research include the environment or setting where the focus groups will be held. To help put participants at ease, it is recommended that focus groups take place in familiar surroundings (Winlow et al., 2013). For example, if working with MFT students the focus group can take place on their campus in an available classroom. Because of the number people involved focus groups can be difficult to schedule. It is suggested that researchers plan well in advanced the date and time of focus groups.

**Focus Group Data Analysis**

Analysis of focus group data includes many of the same aims of the other approaches detailed in this paper. Any formal analysis of focus group data should include a summary of (Breen, 2006):

- The most important themes
- The most noteworthy quotes
- Any unexpected findings

When prepared this way the data allows for reflection on MFT student experience, further developing or modifying of MFT teaching and learning practice, and wider dissemination of good practice (Winlow et al., 2013).

**Other Considerations**

One of the main criticisms of focus groups is that compared with observation studies, they are from highly contrived social settings, and when compared to individual interviews (like in narrative or phenomenological analysis), there are questions about the extent to which the expression of viewpoints in the focus group is shaped by group pressures for conformity (Daly, 2007). Some other dilemmas in focus group research include (a) the reliable comparisons between groups of people, (b) the need to know the actual behaviors of people, (c) getting an institution-wide perspective on people's experiences and (d) wanting to understand recent changes/developments that have occurred over time (Breen, 2006).

Regardless of these limitations in certain types of research that would require statistical analysis or longitudinal, quantitative methodology, focus groups serve many purposes in research. Focus groups can be particularly useful as a means of understanding complex situations, like how those positioned as both teachers and learners experience opposing epistemologies in academic settings, and how family therapy teachers and learners come to a decision to adopt a particular theoretical stance. Although focus groups have been criticized for being contrived situations, they may in fact more closely resemble the complex multivocality of everyday life compared to the standard single interview (Daly, 2007).

### *Recruitment*

Approximately 50-75 marriage and family therapy students enrolled in a program with an emphasis in social justice and postmodern theory will participate in this study, depending on the enrollment and number of volunteers in participating classes. Extra credit will be offered to participants and for those that do not wish to participate in this research, the course syllabus will outline another ways students can earn a comparable amount of extra course credit. Potential student participants will be told about the study in class as described in the protocol. Interested persons will sign a contact list. Chris Hoff, the student researcher, will e-mail interested students more information about the study, which includes the future focus group times. Each focus group will begin with the informed consent process. During this process participants will be informed of the risks and benefits of participating in the interview. Consent and permission will be obtained from the students and they will again be informed of their right to (1) refuse participation and (2) withdraw at anytime without any negative consequences for their grade in the course. Participants will be asked if they have any additional questions or concerns about participation in the study. A request for participant signature on the informed consent document will be made only after any questions or concerns are addressed to the satisfaction of the participant and s/he confirms understanding of the document.

Participation in this study will be voluntary. A student's decision whether or not to participate or withdraw at any time from the study will not affect their ongoing relationship to the participating universities, faculty, or the lead researcher or the instructor of the course they are currently enrolled, and will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled. If students do not wish to participate

in this research, the instructor's course syllabus will outline another way they can earn a comparable amount of extra course credit.

### *Design*

Student volunteers will participate in two 60 to 90 minute focus groups. The first focus group will be about mid-term in the selected course and the second focus group will be near the end of the course. Questions will be designed to generate discussions among the students. Examples include:

a. How have your life experiences shaped your current epistemological stance as a family therapy student?
b. Have you found yourself reexamining any long held beliefs as you are introduced to new epistemological ideas in your studies?
c. How do you imagine epistemology or theory will influence your work in the therapeutic setting?
d. Do you believe it is possible to work from multiple theories or is it better to pick one to work from?

Each general question will be a stimulus for probes about specific examples and asking students who had different or similar experiences. The second focus group will address similar questions, but probe for experiences of change over the course and specific examples of learning experiences that were meaningful to the students.

After the both focus groups are completed and data is collected, formal analysis of focus group data through the use of narrative analysis will include a summary of (Breen, 2006):

- The most important themes
- The most noteworthy quotes
- Any unexpected findings

When the study is completed the data will provide a range of reflections on MFT student experience, allowing the study to further develop or modify MFT teaching and learning practice, leading to potential new theory and pedagogical approaches.

## Data Analysis

### *Narrative Analysis*

Narrative analysis allows for the exploration of personal experience. With regard to MFT education, narrative inquiry provides an avenue for teachers and learners to inform the development and delivery of educational services. Student's narratives provide a platform for identifying aspects of pedagogical practice that can be modified in order to provide more effective and comprehensive educational experiences.

A thematic analysis approach will be used in an effort to stay close to the experiences of students learning new epistemologies, theories, and practices. The researchers believe that stories can have effects beyond their meanings for individual storytellers, creating possibilities and collective action (Riessman, 2008). Diversity of experience is important to the researchers and the thematic analysis approach is well suited to a wide range of stories that develop in interview conversations (Riessman, 2008). The researchers plan for, and welcome, the presence of many different stories likely to include discontinuities and contradictions that offer alternate ways of understanding the experiences of students in an MFT graduate program (Daly, 2007).

### *Procedure*

The researcher will conduct and record focus group interviews with students in a MFT graduate program. The researcher's definition of narrative is the story that unfolds over the course of an interview (Riessman, 2008). This definition is inclusive and will include all speech that relates to the lived experience of attending a graduate MFT program (Riessman, 2008). A sample question that will be used to start all the interviews follows:

*How would you describe your process of learning about the various epistemologies that influence contemporary family therapy?*

This primary line of questioning will include prompts such as, "And then what happened?" or "Can you say more about what that was like?" These prompts, and the lack of preordained set of questions, will encourage the telling of the story of their experience (Daly, 2007).

After completion of interviews the researchers will work with single focus group interviews at a time, isolate and order relevant episodes into chronological biographical accounts (Riessman, 2008). After this process has been completed the researchers will identify underlying assumptions in each story, generate themes, and name them (Riessman, 2008). Particular stories will then be selected to bring forward patterns and underlying assumptions (Riessman, 2008). In organizing these stories we are interested in identifying common elements from various cases that help us to better understand the experience of learning new epistemologies, theories, and practices in a graduate MFT program. To help illustrate the experience of the individuals, the interview material will be quoted extensively, excerpts will be reproduced, and the researchers' interpretations,

understandings of connections between personal narratives, and larger social structures and theoretical formulations will be included in the final report (Riessman, 2008).

## Role of the Researcher

As researchers operating from a narrative paradigm, our role is to frame the area of study and then allow the participants' story to unfold in the direction of mutual interest. In conceptualizing our role as researchers, we must remember that the interviews are jointly constructed narratives. While the participant is the one sharing their story, our position in the interview setting will directly impact the how the story is told (Daly, 2007).

Reflexivity is the way we understand the role of the self in research. It extends past the focus of our research question and also includes the way the researcher is physically present in the research environment (Daly, 2007). Reflexivity is important because it enables the researcher to attend to how the self is impacting all aspects of research including what is being asked, what is being attended to and how it is being interpreted (McIntyre, 2007). It involves how and to what extend the researcher's voice is heard in the research product. Specifically, how the researchers own interests, positions and assumptions influenced inquiry (Charmaz, 2006). In narrative inquiry, it involves examination of how the narratives are constructed through our own participation (Daly, 2007).

The researcher plays an important role in narrative inquiry. Questions, prompts and gestures will elicit different parts of the story and shape the structure of how the narrative is told (Daly, 2007). Additionally, apart from the specific questions and prompts we offer, our individual selves will impact the content and structure of the narrative. Our

gender, ethnicity, race, age and perceived socioeconomic status will impact how a story is told. These factors in combination with our own interests and life experiences will also influence what we interpret from those stories. Therefore it is important to attend to our own assumptions and beliefs while engaged in the research process.

Throughout this study the researcher posits a pedagogical practice of *hybridization* that brings together multiple ideas, and frameworks. One difficulty the researcher struggled with during the course of this study was how to transcend the current contemporary epistemological language and adopt new language that more richly describes and explains the new conceptualizations presented in this study. The researcher grappled with this challenge and ultimately relied on current discourse to describe, theorize and illustrate these new concepts.

## Credibility

Generally, credibility refers to how a research project is planned and organized in congruence with the methodology (Daly, 2007), while reliability and validity refer to the dependability and trustworthiness of the data (Webster & Mertova, 2007). These are objectivist assumptions that are not in alignment with the constructivist nature of narrative analysis. They are addressed by attempts to maintain distance between the researcher and the participant. The narrative inquiry framework however, maintains that the research process is jointly constructed (Daly, 2007). Consequently, validity and reliability must be conceptualized differently when engaging in narrative analysis. Traditional research is based on the scientific method that seeks to identify generalizable, repeatable events. Narrative research however is concerned with exploring individual

truths and experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narratives are not conceptualized as accurate accounts of a world out there (Daly, 2007; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Rather, emphasis is on individual human experience. Narrative researchers understand that stories are constructed and interpreted in different ways. As narrative analysis does not seek to identify concrete truths, validity is more focused on meaningful analysis of the data while reliability refers to the dependability of the data. Validity is addressed by conducting well-grounded research that is supportable by the collected data. Reliability is addressed by the fidelity of the transcripts and notes and by data being collected and recorded in ways that are understandable by those analyzing or auditing it (Webster, & Mertova, 2007).

## Findings

The purpose in using narrative analysis is to gather information that will broaden understandings of individual's experiences of how they talked about behaviors, attitudes, or other resources that had been helpful to them in MFT educational settings (Daly, 2007).

Through this research we anticipate helping MFT educators develop contemporary MFT pedagogical practices better suited for the new terrain of the MFT field. In addition, disseminating knowledge gained from this project with other MFT educators through publishable manuscripts, practice guides, related workshops locally and at national conferences expands the relevance of our research and will allow other MFT educators and academic organizations to MFT students in similar ways.

# CHAPTER 5

# TEACHING AND LEARNING IN FAMILY THERAPY: PREPARING STUDENTS TO WORK ACROSS EPISTEMOLOGIES

**Abstract**

New practice domains are opening up for practitioners of family therapy in the medical, organizational, and human relations fields. In this new environment, family therapy educators and supervisors are required to cross the epistemological spaces of scientist-practitioner, postmodernism, and critical theory. These new possibilities require that family therapist educators become comfortable moving between multiple epistemologies. This poses increasing challenges that will require a hybridization of knowledge and practice approaches. This paper identifies multiple conceptual frameworks for teaching graduate students MFT theory, which apply directly to contemporary family therapy trainee development, and introduces a framework for a developmental pedagogy that will support MFT learners as they get introduced to, begin to integrate, and eventually blend these seemingly differing epistemologies.

## Introduction

The primary purpose of Marriage and Family Therapy education should be to prepare professionals to lead and expand the discipline of Marriage and Family Therapy theoretically, clinically, and scholarly in an increasingly diverse, integrated, and dynamic world (Woolley, 2010). Over a time span of about seven decades Family Therapy has generated many new ideas, methods, and approaches as contexts in which MFT's now practice have changed (Neden, 2011). It could be argued that Marriage and Family Therapy teaching and learning is now being confronted with new 'incommensurate discourses' (Neden, 2007, p. 359) as both teachers and learners are required to navigate the competing epistemologies that are commonly taught in most Marriage and Family Therapy programs. If Marriage and Family Therapy programs are to effectively integrate theory, advance existing theories, develop new relational theories, and expand clinical skills and scholarship, MFT education must ensure that students master, preferably, several MFT theories and models (Woolley, 2010).

As the Marriage and Family Therapy field continues to experience growth in non-traditional domains of practice like organizational development and training, medical family therapy, and conflict resolution and mediation, the hybridization of the field, and lack of clear direction, are beginning to challenge existing programs of study. In this new context where traditional boundaries are evaporating, teachers and learners must become 'bi-lingual' in multiple ontologies and disciplines. In this new environment Ken Gergen (2009) suggests a new approach to education that allows a way to transcend traditional disciplinary and epistemological walls of containment, and begin to find ways to foster "creative cross-talk" (Gergen, 2009, p. 218) between disciplines and epistemologies. Unfortunately this new approach suggested by Gergen (2009) remains elusive as there

has been very little written about the impact of teaching or supervising from the modernist, postmodernist, and critical theory epistemologies simultaneously taught in most Marriage and Family Therapy programs. It is also unknown how MFT students are experiencing these opposing epistemologies, or how and why future Marriage and Family Therapists come to a decision to adopt a particular theoretical stance, and if these epistemological positions can be transcended based on context.

## Background

There has been very little written about the impact of teaching or supervising from the competing epistemologies of; postmodernism, critical theory (critical pedagogy), and modernism (scientist-practitioner) in the practice of family therapy.

A review of the literature shows that the postmodern concept of collaborative learning is being explored in many settings, with many types of approaches including collaborative pedagogy (Stride, Daly & Jackson, 2010). Even with these expanding efforts of bringing postmodern approaches to the classroom, students experience ambivalence towards postmodernism, both in the therapeutic context and in the classroom, and these students have difficulty adopting this theory as they attempt to adjust to this different form of thinking (Stride et al., 2010).

The teaching and training of family therapists in critical theory is not without similar challenges. The literature points out the importance of creatively engaging students and facilitating open conversations in the classroom, in the therapy room, and in life about the relevance of the larger socio-cultural context to our work (Esmiol, Knudson- Martin & Delgado, 2012). One challenge to this work is that asking students to set aside the stability of the familiar in favor of practices of critique may not appeal

unless it is an interest they hold, and because of the potential for destabilization, this effort will require a deliberate effort from both the teacher and learner (Marsten & Howard, 2006).

Additionally, in family therapy education, there has been a revisiting of the consistent call for a scientist-practitioner model of MFT education (Crane, Wampler, Sprenkle, Sandberg & Hovestadt, 2002; Karam & Sprenkle 2010; Lee III & Nichols, 2010; Wampler 2010). In an environment where nearly three-quarters of MFT students are master's students, and typically clinically focused, this model can prove to be a challenging match (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). Here again a shift to the research informed framework will also encounter similar challenges (as noted previously) within MFT education. To overcome this challenge, it has been suggested that an alternative to this dilemma is to shift to a "research informed" perspective as opposed to the scientist-practitioner framework for clinically oriented MFT master's programs (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). Even though proponents of the research informed model decry the false dichotomy between research and practice, and art and science, they still call for more rigorous standards supporting this ideology and suggest increased support and enforcement from both COAMFTE and AAMFT (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). To MFT educators and practitioners that teach from the postmodern and critical lens, there is a concern that this shift and privileging of the research informed approach will adversely affect the development of new theory and broad-based clinical skills, and students will not be prepared to lead the field through training MFTs (Woolley, 2010).

Finally, Family therapy has moved out of the clinic and into hospitals, medical centers, business organizations, courts, and school systems (Lee, III & Nichols, 2010).

Additionally, the latest COAMFTE accreditation standards and the move to MFT core competencies, necessitates adopting a contemporary pedagogical model (Gehart, 2011). Together these practical implications expand the field into these new domains, and MFT educators will be challenged to develop new ways to educate and train competent therapists, mediators, and consultants.

In the midst of all of these new demands, the MFT educator's most critical task will be to create a shift in MFT pedagogy (Gehart, 2011). Specifically educators will have to engage students from varying fields and interests and navigate them through epistemological understanding and integration. Although a significant challenge, there are some potential guideposts and best practices that seem to offer a greater benefit in the face of these challenges.

## Best Practices in Developing Pedagogical Models for MFTs

The proposed remedy of adopting an integrated developmental pedagogy and taking best practices from seemingly oppositional epistemological approaches is a best practice approach to deal with both the expansion of the field into new domains and MFT education's move to a core competencies model of education. Because no single model of teaching can capture and respond to the complexity and nuances of the teaching–learning process, particularly in a field such as MFT (Caldwell & Claxton, 2010), we present merely best practices from within and across the various MFT teaching approaches. We specifically focus on practices from the Postmodern, Critical and research-informed pedagogies.

## *Postmodern Pedagogy*

Postmodern pedagogy speaks of a worldview rather than a "model" or "theory" per se, and this worldview is explicit not just in the *content* of the teaching but also in the *process* of teaching (Pare & Tarragona, 2006). In an effort to privilege process over content, postmodern educators have adopted several concepts and stances to bring postmodern family therapy approaches to life. These approaches and stances can take several forms but most commonly; collaboration, critical inquiry and attention to context in the classroom.

### Collaboration

The collaboration emphasis in postmodern pedagogy challenges the traditional hierarchal structure of the professor as educator and student as learner (Stride et al., 2010). A popular way postmodern educators flatten this hierarchal structure is through the use of learning communities (Gehart, 2007; Stride et al., 2010). The learning community approach, which involves "learning by doing", has been shown to improve student engagement and performance and promote higher levels of learning and reasoning (Gehart, 2007; Stride et al., 2010). These learning communities can take several forms but all believe every voice matters and the learning environment is enhanced by the inclusion of multiple perspectives. In this effort the postmodern educator's role is to form a collaborative relationship and assist students in becoming proactive in developing shared goals for the classroom (Gehart, 2007; Stride et al., 2010).

## Critical Inquiry

Postmodern pedagogical practices emerge from a critique of the status quo and often takes the form of a mutual and critical deconstruction of taken for granted and unexamined ideas about persons and problems (Pare & Tarragona, 2006). It takes issue with any overarching explanations of knowing whether humanist, feminist, Christian, capitalist, or critical theoretical and instead focuses on multiple and local forms of truth (Kilgore, 2004). With postmodern critical inquiry comes a reconfiguration of how learners think they know the world and the postmodern educator can then encourage differing forms of the meaning, language and thought that the MFT learners may bring to the classroom, without expecting them to conform to dominant cultural patterns or the teacher's authority (Kilgore, 2004). Critical inquiry and reflection in postmodern pedagogy can help MFT students to evaluate the theories and assumptions that inform family therapy practice, take up multiple perspectives, and become agents of social change (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006).

## Attention to Context

Postmodern pedagogy also includes the recognition that MFT education is a situated, collective learning process embedded in difference (Kilgore, 2004). Therefore, a postmodern pedagogy would have MFT educators be transparent with differences, thoughts, opinions, and administrative practices (Gehart, 2007). This willingness by the postmodern educator to situate themselves within their own social location, acknowledging the institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic trajectories of their lives allows for the questioning, critiquing, and sometimes even rejection of the social

positions of teacher and student (Kilgore, 2004). This openness by the postmodern instructor is important for reducing the natural hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship and facilitating a more collaborative process (Gehart, 2007).

### *Critical Pedagogy*

Unlike the postmodern pedagogy, which also values critical inquiry, the development of critical and cultural consciousness in critical pedagogy is more action based and rests on an intent of liberation. Paulo Freire (1970) wrote that cultural action is always a systemic and deliberate form of action and that it aims at surmounting the antagonistic contradictions of the social structure, thereby achieving the liberation of human beings. Teachers of critical pedagogy in MFT programs believe that the failure to address diversity and social justice issues contributes to continued oppression of traditionally marginalized groups through ineffective and/or harmful therapeutic interventions (Garcia, Kosutic, McDowell & Anderson, 2009).

Critical pedagogy offers students and educators new forms of agency and useful tools enabling them to examine and deconstruct the dominating culture's oppressive discourse (Keating, 2007). These tools can take the main forms, from; dialogical practice, critical consciousness, and social justice in clinical practice.

#### Dialogical Practice

MFT programs have long relied on the banking account model of education. The banking account model of education was described by Paulo Freire (1970) as "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor"

(pg. 72). The dialogical approach counters the banking account and lecture model by favoring dialogue and open communication among students (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006). Nylund & Tilsen (2006) use the dialogical method to situate their roles as teachers as "participant mangers" (pg. 23) of classroom conversations and keep classroom conversations moving along by drawing on the unique knowledges and diversity of the learners multiple perspectives. Critical pedagogy believes that social transformation begins with dialogue and by using language they can make visible hidden systems of power, privilege and oppression, beginning a critical transformation towards liberation (Almeida, Hernandez-Wolfe & Tubbs, 2011).

**Critical Consciousness**

Critical pedagogy believes that acquiring a critical contextual perspective can inform therapeutic decisions in ways that raise social awareness and support social equity (Garcia & McDowell, 2010). Critical pedagogy challenges MFT learners to examine their own biases, assumptions, and cultural worldviews that contribute to social inequalities/inequities, and to begin to develop alliances and strategies that promote social justice (Garcia et al., 2009). Critical pedagogy believes that in raising critical consciousness in MFT learners they will in turn develop therapist competence by diminishing the possibilities of further oppression of clients in assessment and treatment, validating of clients experiences, helping clients navigate multiple systems of care and resist systemic oppression, and recognizing and challenging personal biases (Garcia et al., 2009).

Contemporary MFT education is paying greater attention to both cultural and critical consciousness and how to teach transformation to MFT learners. The development of critical and cultural consciousness enables MFT learners to recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006).

**Social Justice in Clinical Practice**

Few graduate level training programs have found effective ways to interconnect the ways that power, privilege, and oppression can be addressed in clinical practice with couples and families (Parker, 2009). Critical pedagogy posits that a social justice perspective requires that family therapists make visible in the therapeutic setting larger socio/cultural systems and discourses that may be producing oppression and that family therapists must continually examine their own social locations. Critical pedagogy asks that MFT learners attend to presenting therapeutic issues by addressing the specific interplay of power, privilege, and oppression in family and community life (Almeida, Hernandez-Wolfe & Tubbs, 2011).

## ***Research-Informed Pedagogy***

There is an increasing consensus in MFT education that the curriculum in MFT programs are out of date with an overemphasis on older theories that defined the profession and an under emphasis on newer evidence-based treatments (Wampler, 2010). From this critique of MFT programs there has been a call for a more balanced approach to MFT education where deficits in research training are understood and the gap between

clinical research and practice is bridged in an effort to improve the quality of education in MFT programs (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010; Wampler, 2010). In an effort to integrate research into MFT programs while remaining clinical in focus, best practices could include adopting a research-informed perspective, measuring client progress and outcomes, and directly involving students in research.

**Research-Informed Perspective**

The research informed perspective is concerned with integrating research and practice while avoiding the "either/or" split that seems to put researchers and clinicians into two oppositional camps (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). Unlike the scientist-practitioner model where the MFT learner is trained to develop new and original research, the research-informed perspective is interested in training MFT learners to integrate existing knowledge into their clinical practices (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). Some approaches the MFT educator can use in the effort to develop a research-informed perspective include; share how research informs their clinical work, show how non clinical research findings relevant to MFT can be used to help clients in session, and teach how to critically evaluate relevant research findings form multiple perspectives (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010).

**Measuring Client Progress and Outcomes**

It is easy for MFT students to get captured by the variety of new learnings in MFT programs such as scholarship, social justice, politics of change, and the innovative ways of understanding the human condition, and forget that the discipline of MFT is

about helping the people that consult with us improve their lives and access lasting positive change through relationships (Wooley, 2010). In the effort to make sure clients are making progress, and to reduce the divide between researchers and clinicians, measuring client progress is becoming an important part of standard clinical practice (Stith, 2014). Progress research is valuable to MFT education and the research-informed perspective because it gives MFT learners firsthand insight into the change process of their clients and employs instruments that are both research and clinical tools (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). By incorporating progress research in MFT education, faculty can model how research, in addition to theory, can guide clinical decision making (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010).

**Direct Involvement in Research**

It is essential to the advancement of the field that a wide variety of scholarship continues on the unique contextual, relational approaches of the MFT field (Wooley, 2010). If MFT learners get involved in conducting qualitative and quantitative research, writing grant proposals and papers, and developing, integrating, and advancing theory, they will become more informed and passionate consumers of research, even if they do not choose a career in research (Stith, 2014, Wooley, 2010).

## *Developmental Pedagogy in MFT*

As stated earlier there has been very little written about the impact of teaching or supervising from the competing epistemologies of postmodernism, critical theory (critical pedagogy), and modernism (scientist-practitioner) in the practice of family therapy. Much

more needs to be done in this regard because the destabilization that occurs as a MFT learner shifts from one way of knowing to a more complex way of knowing can be painful and frustrating (Marsten & Howard, 2006, Caldwell & Claxton, 2009). To address this challenge, the following framework is presented to help MFT teachers navigate the seemingly conflicting MFT theories. This new framework integrates the holding environment from the developmental constructivist perspective (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009) and scaffolding from Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

**The Holding Environment**

While there are many useful aspects to Caldwell and Claxton's (2009) developmental-constructivist perspective, arguably the most applicable to this current challenge at hand is the concept of holding environments. The holding environment is the context in which, and out of which, a person grows. This environment consists of three functions: (a) *confirming* persons where they are, (b) *contradicting*, or letting go or introducing other kinds of possibilities, and (c) creating *continuity* by remaining in place during the period of transformation and growth (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009).

The holding environment provides a map for MFT educators where they can recognize and give attention to the learners' present way of making meaning, then critique, reflect and possibly change taken for granted assumptions, and provide intellectual and emotional space for students as they try on new ways of thinking (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009). The holding environment allows both the MFT teacher and learner to be more collaborative and "experience near" as sometimes painful "growth spurts" take place as the learner is experiencing new ways of knowing.

**Scaffolding**

Building upon the holding environment, the concept of scaffolding is also of use. Lev Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist who developed the idea that the potential for cognitive development depends upon the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). Vygotsky emphasized that learning was not an achievement of independent learning but rather social collaboration and that the ZPD bridges the gap of what is known and what is possible to know, and it is in this gap that learning happens (Ramey, Young, Rock & Tarulli, 2010). Scaffolding in the zone of proximal development is done by breaking down tasks into manageable steps which are structured at first but allow for gradual progression from collaborative to independent performance (Ramey et al., 2010).

For a student coming from a traditional undergraduate education into a MFT program that values collaboration and the pedagogical approaches discussed earlier, this change of learning culture can feel like getting launched from Vygotsky's *known and familiar* to the *possible to know* in an instant, missing all the learning that is to happen in the gap, often leaving the MFT learner frustrated and disappointed. Using Vygotsky's scaffolding approach, the role of the MFT educator would be to (Ramey et al., 2010): (a) make the MFT learner's current base of knowledge more visible to the learner without them being fully defined by these concepts, (b) assist MFT learner in revising their relationships with base concepts and knowledge and (c) develop these concepts more richly by develop leading activities that will expand learning in new directions. The scaffolding approach to MFT education also gives MFT educators a map to further reduce the potentially painful and frustrating process of acquiring new knowledge.

## Developmental Pedagogy in Action

To better understand the applicability of these concepts the following section provides practical exploration of the concepts in action, from the initial conceptualization of a course through syllabus development, to the theoretical stance of the educator, ending at the delivery of the best practices framework.

In preparing a course, the MFT educator should declare what they believe to be of value: questions, insights, theories, and methods of inquiry (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009). This can be explicit in even the syllabus of the course. For example, the syllabus in developmental pedagogy should include all aspects of the best practices model. Although counter-intuitive, this means that even in a postmodern theory course there should be some aspect of research-informed pedagogy best practices included in the course curriculum.

Providing students with a framework for readings, discussions, and projects serves as a way of staking out the ground of the *known and familiar* while beginning to chart a course to *the possible to know*. In this way the syllabus in a developmental pedagogy MFT theory course provides students with a framework that allows the instructor to acknowledge their agency and move toward making them more responsible for their own education.

It has been argued that courses where the professor does the research, and makes the decisions regarding what content is most pertinent to teach, is an outdated method of teaching and runs against postmodern practices of teaching in MFT (Stride, Daly & Jackson, 2010). However, if adhering to Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, at this early stage of the course too much collaboration, even when well intentioned (like for a postmodern theory course), can be too much too soon, and can create frustration and confusion.

Rather, in the development pedagogy model of MFT it would be recommended that the educator be more directive early on, when developing a syllabus for a postmodern theory course, and that space is left after the first half of the class for students to actively participate in determining how the class may be completed. What assignments and additional readings to include, and how they would prefer to be evaluated in the end.

### *Integrating Best Practices throughout the Course.*

In this section I will provide practical guidance on how best practices from the developmental pedagogy model, including critical pedagogy and research-informed pedagogy aspects, can be integrated throughout a postmodern theory course.

## Postmodern Pedagogy

Postmodern pedagogical practices encourage intellectual agency and active learning. In a MFT postmodern theories course comes a reconfiguration of how learners think they know the world and the educator can then encourage differing forms of the meaning, language and thought MFT learners may bring to the classroom, without expecting them to conform to dominant cultural patterns or the teachers authority (Kilgore, 2004). Collaboration, critical inquiry and attention to context in postmodern pedagogy can help MFT students to evaluate the theories and assumptions over the life of the course and "map" the distances they have travelled in the course. A possible assignment (or leading action per scaffolding theory) would be the following:

*Assignment #1: This assignment is a 2 PART assignment.*

- *PART A: invites you to examine your own thoughts/perspectives/beliefs about truth and meaning. For instance, how do you define truth? How did you come to your current belief or value system? Who were the greatest influences on your "worldview?" Have any long held beliefs change over time? Overall, the purpose of this assignment is to help you think through the beliefs and assumptions you already carry about truth and meaning that you have learned through your family and other contextual environments around you. DUE: (halfway through class).*
- *PART B of this assignment invites you to reflect on how the material of this course has impacted thoughts/perspectives/beliefs about truth and meaning. Given what you have learned, read, and dialogued about in this course, what are you taking with you? Please use APA format and reference at least 3 course readings that directly impacted your thoughts/perspectives/beliefs about truth and meaning. This assignment will be worth 20 points. DUE: (End of class)*

**Critical Pedagogy**

Unlike the postmodern pedagogy, which also values critical inquiry, the development of critical and cultural consciousness in critical pedagogy is more action based with intent of liberation. Paulo Freire (1970) wrote that cultural action is always a systemic and deliberate form of action and that it aims at surmounting the antagonistic contradictions of the social structure, thereby achieving the liberation of human beings. Teachers of critical pedagogy in MFT programs believe that the failure to address diversity and social justice issues contributes to continued oppression of traditionally

marginalized groups through ineffective and/or harmful therapeutic interventions (Garcia, Kosutic, McDowell & Anderson, 2009). An assignment to include in a MFT postmodern theories course that would include elements of critical pedagogy best practices (dialogic practice/critical consciousness/social justice) could be the following:

> *Immersion Experience (25 points). Each of you will be responsible for actively investigating postmodern approaches in the "real world," outside of the classroom. This immersion project involves experiential learning and "deconstructing" of current systems of care in mental health. The intent is to increase your knowledge and sensitivity to challenges of providing systemic/relational care in real world environments. You will be asked to attend a brief immersion at the MHA Village in Long Beach on a Wednesday morning from 9am to 12am. The curriculum at the Village covers client-driven programs, multidisciplinary service teams, "menu approach" to services, collaborative psychiatry, employment approaches, social coaching strategies, ethical issues, self-help, family roles and outcomes-based evaluation. You will be required to turn in a 3 to 5 page paper detailing your experience and how social justice, positions of power and privilege, as well as ethical considerations of marginalization and discrimination in counseling interactions were present.*

**Research-Informed Pedagogy**

As stated earlier, in the developmental pedagogy model a postmodern theory course should include some aspect of research-informed pedagogy best practices in the course curriculum. The modernist (scientist-practitioner) leanings of research-informed

practice included in a postmodern theory course may at first glance seem like strange bedfellows, but this inclusion is by design. The intention of developmental pedagogy in MFT is to create creative cross talk between disciplines, and to blur boundaries between epistemological stances. This approach is very congruent with the postmodern ethos of not privileging any one particular way of knowing, while also providing space for MFT students to critically examine the evidence-based practice movement in mental health care.

In a postmodern theory course it could be easy for MFT students to get captured by the variety of new learnings, and the innovative ways of understanding the human condition, and forget that the discipline of MFT is about helping the people that consult with us improve their lives and access lasting positive change through relationships (Woolley, 2010). In the effort to make sure clients are making progress, and to reduce the divide between researchers and clinicians, measuring client progress is becoming an important part of standard clinical practice (Stith, 2014). Progress research is valuable to MFT education and the research-informed perspective because it gives MFT learners firsthand insight into the change process of their clients and employs instruments that are both research and clinical tools (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). By incorporating progress research in MFT education, faculty can model how research, in addition to theory, can guide clinical decision-making (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010).

In this effort either one of the following two assignments could be included in a postmodern theory course. These assignments would be successful in disrupting the privileging of research in contemporary times (from a postmodern perspective), while

also showing its usefulness to clinicians that may want to practice from a postmodern lens. The assignment's follow:

*Assignment One - Real World Research Article*

*Each member of the class will be responsible to find a report in the news (Facebook, T.V., magazine, etc.) and track down the original research study and compare the report to the study. Keep in mind sample size, methodology, claims, who the researchers are, etc. Draw your own conclusions based on the original research report in relation to what was reported in the news. You will present your article findings to the class. (10 points)*

*Assignment Two - Research to Practice (2)*

*In this assignment you will be given a clinical problem, and then asked to locate a research article that has relevant information for the problem and approaches the problem from a postmodern therapy theory. You will need to write a brief paper (1-2 pages) that describes how you found and selected the study, and the key clinical insight you gained from the study. These will also be discussed in class. (10 points each = 20 points total)*

**A Holding Environment and Scaffolding Example.**

Another exercise used to "set the stage" for how educators and students will talk about epistemologies (postmodern & modern) and as a way of starting the scaffolding process to different ways of knowing is an exercise titled Form A/Form B (adapted from Alice Morgan, 1999). This exercise is delivered at the beginning of the course and involves giving the class two distinct questionnaires. Form A includes questions you

might find on a standard job application, or intake form. Some example questions on Form A include; marital status, place of employment, highest level of education and presenting problem. Form B includes questions of a different sort. Some example question on Form B include; "What name do you like to be called? What do you like about that?" or "In your life, what experiences and knowledges do you value?"

After distributing the forms the educator asks the class to choose one of the forms to fill out and provide a time limit. After the students complete the forms the educator writes Form A and Form B on the board and began the discussion. Some of the questions used to guide the class discussion include (Morgan, 1999):

*Would anyone like to comment on what they noticed about the differences between the two forms? (write up responses on whiteboard in two columns Form A, Form B)*

- *What types of knowledges were the forms interested in?*
- *What was the overall tone of the questions?*
- *Who held the expertise?*
- *Did you notice any differences in the power relationships between the administrator and you?*
- *How were difficulties/problems thought about?*
- *How were issues of gender, class, culture, sexual preference, and age addressed?*
- *How were other people referred to? In what context and on what basis were they consulted?*
- *What information were they asked to offer?*
- *What would be real effects on you as a person after completing them?*

- *How might a person be 'left' after doing them?*
- *What options for comment and evaluation were given?*
- *What particular ideas shaped the questions?*

This exercise does a wonderful job of creating lively discussion around modernist and postmodern ideas and provides a platform about how we can begin to talk about differing ideas throughout the course. For example, educators and students can refer to various ideas as "Form A ideas" or "Form B ideas." Providing a frame of reference as they move through the course. This exercise is also congruent with the developmental pedagogy approach in MFT as it captures both the holding environment and scaffolding approaches in the model. In accordance with the holding environment this exercise creates a context to access the holding environment's three functions: (a) *confirming* persons where they are, (b) *contradicting*, which involves letting go or introducing other kinds of possibilities, and (c) creating *continuity* by remaining in place during the period of transformation and growth (Caldwell & Claxton, 2009). While also starting the process of *scaffolding* which will assist MFT learners in revising their relationships with base concepts and knowledge and begin to develop these concepts more richly, expanding learning in new directions.

## Conclusion

The developmental pedagogy model of MFT education teaching method requires a spirit of action, collaboration, and flexibility from the MFT educator. The developmental pedagogy model of MFT education challenges educators from all epistemological positions. For those MFT educators with more modernist leanings, it

asks for an adaption of both critical pedagogy and postmodern pedagogy best practices. For the more postmodern or critical leaning MFT educators it challenges a revisiting to ideas and approaches that may have been opposed (and regularly critiqued) in the past. The developmental pedagogy model in MFT asks MFT educators to recognize that critical academic discourse is based on and grounded in disagreement and that this antagonistic foundation continues to create barriers to developing creative compromises, or from generating innovative hybrid perspectives that draw from different points of view, thus locking us into reactionary and oppositional stances that harm us as students, teachers, scholars, and colleagues (Keating, 2013).

The world that awaits the MFT student is changing at a rapid pace and provides many challenges, as well as opportunities. The proposed remedy of adopting an integrated developmental pedagogy and taking best practices from seemingly oppositional epistemological approaches is a best practice approach to deal with both the expansion of the field into new domains and MFT education's move to a core competencies model of education.

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# CHAPTER SIX

# DEVELOPMENTAL EPISTEMOLOGY IN MFT EDUCATION: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCES

**Abstract**

As the field of Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) evolves and expands to new practice domains, family therapy educators are increasingly required to cross the epistemological spaces of scientist-practitioner, postmodernism, and critical theory. Becoming familiar and comfortable moving between multiple epistemologies requires a hybridization of knowledge and practice approaches in the pedagogy of MFT. This study used focus groups consisting of 34 participants in their first quarter of a Master's degree program in MFT as they learn multiple, potentially contradicting theories. A narrative analysis led to a rich set of themes that were found to reflect the experiences of these students. The emergent themes describe both student experiences as they went through their first quarter, as well as their desires for what they would have found helpful. The results of this study have important implications for future MFT pedagogical practices.

*Keywords*: pedagogy, epistemology, family therapy, narrative analysis

## Introduction

The primary purpose of Marriage and Family Therapy education should be to prepare professionals to lead and expand the discipline of Marriage and Family Therapy theoretically, clinically, and scholarly in an increasingly diverse, integrated, and dynamic world (Woolley, 2010). Over a time span of about seven decades, the field has generated many new ideas, methods, and approaches as contexts have changed (Neden, 2011). It could be argued that Marriage and Family Therapy teaching and learning is now being confronted with new "incommensurate discourses" (Neden, 2007, p. 359) as both teachers and learners are required to navigate the competing epistemologies that are commonly taught in most programs. This schism is made more apparent as the field begins to "draw lines in the sand" and defend positions that include the belief that it is impossible to integrate theories across epistemologies (Dickerson, 2010). Or the belief that if MFT programs are to effectively integrate theory, advance existing theories, develop new relational theories, expand clinical skills and scholarship, MFT education must ensure that students preferably master several MFT theories and models (Woolley, 2010).

As the field of Marriage and Family Therapy continues to experience growth in non-traditional domains of practice like organizational development and training, medical family therapy, and conflict resolution and mediation, MFT education is confronting a major shift. This hybridization of the field, and lack of clear direction, is beginning to challenge existing programs of study. In this new context where traditional boundaries are evaporating, teachers and learners must become 'bi-lingual' in multiple ontologies and disciplines. In this environment, Ken Gergen (2009) suggests a new approach to

education that allows a way to transcend traditional disciplinary and epistemological walls of containment, and begin to find ways to foster "creative cross-talk" (Gergen, 2009, p. 218) between disciplines and epistemologies. Unfortunately this new approach suggested by Gergen (2009) remains elusive as there has been very little written about the impact of teaching or supervising from the modernist, postmodernist, and critical theory epistemologies simultaneously taught in most Marriage and Family Therapy programs. It is also unknown how those positioned as MFT students are experiencing these opposing epistemologies, or how and why future Marriage and Family Therapists come to a decision to adopt a particular theoretical stance, and if these epistemological positions can be transcended based on context.

This study sought to examine teaching and learning in family therapy education through student experiences as they are introduced to multiple epistemological perspectives, in an effort to map a course toward new pedagogical practices in the family therapy field. This study examined the process, discourse, and patterns that emerged for new students participating in a family therapy program.

The following set of overarching questions framed the study:

a. Through narrative analysis what student experiences stood out as they were introduced to multiple perspectives that include scientist-practitioner, critical theory, and postmodernism/social constructionism in the practice of family therapy?
b. What skills can teachers develop as students navigate multiple, often conflicting epistemological stances?
c. What patterns and preferences with regard to the teaching and learning

process emerged as the study progressed, and how can these findings inform new pedagogical practice

The central concern of this study is pedagogical practices in family therapy and the effects of these practices as described by MFT students. Although the lens of this study is through student experiences, the researcher's main focus was to track and detail the forms these practices take, or how they may be developed in the future, rather than how students adopt a particular theory for example.

## Background

There has been very little written about the impact of teaching from the competing epistemologies of postmodernism, critical theory (critical pedagogy), and modernism (scientist-practitioner) in the practice of family therapy. A review of the literature shows that the postmodern concept of collaborative learning is being explored in many settings, with many types of approaches (Stride, Daly & Jackson, 2010). Even with these expanding efforts of bringing postmodern approaches to the classroom, students experience ambivalence towards postmodernism, both in the therapeutic context and in the classroom, and have difficulty adopting this theory as they attempt to adjust to this different form of thinking (Stride et al., 2010).

The teaching and training of family therapists in critical theory is not without similar challenges. The literature points out the importance of creatively engaging students and facilitating open conversations in the classroom, in the therapy room, and in life about the relevance of the larger socio-cultural context to our work (Esmiol, Knudson- Martin & Delgado, 2012). To ask students to set aside the stability of the familiar in favor of practices of critique may not appeal unless it is an interest they hold,

and because of the potential for destabilization, this effort will require a deliberate effort from both the teacher and learner (Marsten & Howard, 2006).

More recently in family therapy education, there has been a revisiting of the consistent call for a scientist-practitioner model of MFT education (Karam & Sprenkle 2010, Wampler 2010, Lee III & Nichols, 2010, Crane, Wampler, Sprenkle, Sandberg & Hovestadt, 2002). In an environment where nearly three-quarters of MFT students are master's level, and typically clinically focused, this model can prove to be a challenging match (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). The suggested alternative to this dilemma is to shift to a "research informed" perspective as opposed to the scientist-practitioner framework for clinically oriented MFT master's programs (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010).

Even with a shift to the research informed framework there are still many challenges ahead for this model of MFT education. While proponents of the research informed model decry the false dichotomy between research and practice and art and science, they still call for more rigorous standards supporting this ideology and suggest increased support and enforcement from both COAMFTE and AAMFT (Karam & Sprenkle, 2010). To MFT educators and practitioners that teach from the postmodern and critical lens, there is a concern that this shift and privileging of the research informed approach will adversely affect the development of new theory and broad-based clinical skills, and students will not be prepared to lead the field through training MFTs (Woolley, 2010).

## Conceptual Approach

This study was guided conceptually by social constructionist thought, actor-network theory and Vygotsky's educational theory.

One of the central premises of social construction is the acknowledgement of multiple perspectives and the detachment from a particular view about what might be effective in the classroom, in order to generate new meanings and understandings (Philp et al., 2007). Situating the research in a social constructionist lens shifts the emphasis from individual knowers to the collaborative construction of knowledge and draws attention to the quality of relationships, between teachers and students, among students, and between the classroom and the surrounding world (Gergen, 1999).

Actor-network-theory shows how the entities that we commonly work with in educational research— classrooms, teaching, students, knowledge generation, curriculum, policy, inequities, —are in fact assemblies of myriad things that order and govern educational practices (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). Bearing traces of systems theory, actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005), is not as concerned with the individual but rather the patterns of relations among persons and how various technologies are embedded in broader *networks* of events (Gergen, 2009). For example, many systems theorists are only concerned with the casual relations within a single class of entities (Gergen, 2009). However ANT differs in that it seeks to relate elements across classes and treats human actions, discourse, text books, geographic locations, etc., as interacting participants in the system (Gergen, 2009). The ANT approach will allow this study to track humans and non-humans (text books, syllabi, etc.) in relation with one another and how this plays out in the classroom. ANT rather than document the stable transcendence into a single ontology or epistemological position (or truth), is interested in making visible the problems and enactments during the enrolments of multiple ways of knowing, and how different knowledges exist simultaneously (Fenwick & Edwards,

2010). In an era where experiential and inter-disciplinary approaches to learning are being encouraged, the educational implications for the family therapy field are becoming increasingly important. So, ANT can show how such assemblages in education can be unmade as well as made, and how counter-networks or alternative forms and spaces can take shape and develop strength (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011).

Vygotsky's educational theory will be an important lens for this study because at the heart of Vygotsky's theory lies the understanding that human cognition and learning is social and cultural rather than an individual phenomena (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev and Miller, 2003). This lens is important because Vygotsky prompts us to inquire into the nature of knowledge used in the classroom, and the relationships among students, teachers, and knowledge (Kozulin, et al. 2003). Vygotsky's educational theory will guide this study in its examination of the primacy of a developmental or dialectical perspective; the plurality of cultural practices, social relations, and symbol systems in the mediation and development of thinking; and the importance of individual agency in the formation of particular subjectivities in marriage and family therapy education (Moll, 2014). The combination of Vygotskian theory and ANT analysis provides a framework for considering social interactions, the environments in which they occur, and how these networks come together and evolve.

## Purpose

Whether we are referring to the practices of discourse and reasoning that have come to define different forms of education, or how students, through their lived experience accumulate and make sense of knowledge, education is always a cultural process (Moll, 2014). This study sought to understand student experiences as they are

introduced to multiple epistemological perspectives, and the discourses and cultural processes that operate in family therapy education. The three conceptual frameworks of social constructionism, actor-network-theory, and Vygotskian theory, offer a set of lenses that allowed for a closer examination of how family therapy learners approach and adopt competing theories and knowledges. Because epistemological values and the specific translation of epistemology into the practice of therapy influences therapists' style, the working alliance with clients, and use of specific techniques (Lee, Neimeyer, And Rice, 2013), adopting these three frameworks was congruent with the spirit of the study and supported and encouraged a synthesis of scientist-practitioner approaches, critical theory and postmodern practices in the classroom. Adopting these three conceptual approaches in the study of family therapy education contextualize the cultural experiences of students in family therapy programs, and supports the emergence of a hybridization of teaching and learning in family therapy education based on students experiences, leading to the development of new pedagogies of possibilities.

## Methodology

In order to explore the experiences of new students in the field of marriage and family therapy as they learn the various conflicting epistemologies, this study will conduct a thematic narrative analysis of data constructed through focus groups.

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of a total of 34 participants, all of who were in their first quarter of a Master's degree program in Marriage and Family Therapy. Students were initially told about the study in a course and were offered extra credit for participation. Participation was voluntary, and students were also offered alternative ways of earning

comparable extra credit. Interested students put their information on a contact list that was provided to the researcher. Participants chose the focus group that was most convenient for them. All 34 students invited participated in the study.

All participants were from the same Master's degree program, which has a special focus on working from a social justice lens. All 34 students participated in the focus groups and each group ranged in size from 6 to 9 students in each group.

*Data Construction*

This study collected data through two sets of 60 to 90 minute focus groups. The first round of focus groups was conducted during the student's first term in their program, around the middle of the quarter. The second sets of focus groups were during the end of the first quarter. Questions were designed to generate discussions among the students. Examples include:

a. How have your life experiences shaped your current epistemological stance as a family therapy student?
b. Have you found yourself reexamining any long held beliefs as you are introduced to new epistemological ideas in your studies?
c. How do you imagine epistemology or theory will influence your work in the therapeutic setting?
d. Do you believe it is possible to work from multiple theories or is it better to pick one to work from?

Each general question was a stimulus for probes about specific examples. Also probes were used to investigate whether students had different or similar experiences. The second focus group addressed similar questions, but probed for experiences of change

over the course and specific examples of learning experiences that were meaningful to the students. An example of this was to directly ask about change over time, or their direct experience of the process of learning new theory, Probes that were not asked in the first round of focus groups.

The focus groups were held in a classroom that the students were familiar with on their campus. Participants signed up for a particular focus groups based on time and availability. All sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts were used for analysis. In these focus groups, the researcher was the only facilitator. The researcher's role was to be a moderator. The role of the moderator included ensuring that all topics are covered, using prompts where required, ensuring that all participants have a chance to comment on each question, and picking up on issues raised by participants (Winlow et al., 2013). The facilitator also guided discussions when needed as sensitive to power relations in an effort to encourage participation from all members (Winlow et al., 2013).

An interview guide was used to ensure that key topics of discussion were covered. This guide was grounded in the research aims of the study and gave the facilitator careful consideration of wording, useful key phrases and the sequencing of questions (Winlow et al., 2013). It was also useful in ensuring that there was consistency across the various focus groups (Breen, 2006).

*Analysis*

All focus groups were audiotaped in their entirety. The audiotapes were then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then red and reread by the researcher and notes were made of the development of general themes. Narrative units or statements and

descriptions by the students were then placed under corresponding general themes. Narrative thematic analysis of the transcripts was used in order to draw out the most important themes, most noteworthy quotes and any unexpected findings (Breen, 2006). Narrative analysis was chosen because it allows for the exploration of personal experience.

During analysis, the researcher analyzed the first round of focus group interviews together and ordered relevant episodes into chronological biographical accounts (Riessman, 2008). This process was repeated with the second round of focus group interviews. After this process was complete the researcher identified underlying assumptions in each story and generated themes and named them (Riessman, 2008). Particular stories were then selected to bring forward patterns and underlying assumptions (Riessman, 2008). In organizing these stories, we were interested in identifying common elements from various cases that help us to better understand the experience of learning new epistemologies, theories, and practices in a graduate MFT program. To help illustrate the experience of the individuals, the interview material was quoted extensively, excerpts are reproduced, and the researchers' interpretations, understandings of connections between personal narratives, and larger social structures and theoretical formulations were discussed (Riessman, 2008).

## Results

The data collected contributes a rich set of themes that reflect the experiences of students in their first quarter of learning multiple, potentially contradictory theories, and other themes that reflect student needs and desires as they move through the initial portion of their MFT program. The data that emerged reflect both the deep and varied

student experiences that took place as they were introduced to multiple perspectives in their first quarter, as well as student desires that they would have liked to have had met during their experience. The results in each of these areas uniquely inform potential future MFT pedagogical practices.

### *Student Experiences*

The two main areas in which data about student experiences emerged were about the destabilization of self and the relationship between worldview and theory adoption.

#### Destabilization

An important experience of students in their first year of an MFT program was that of destabilization as students' worldviews were challenged by ideas around postmodernism, social justice, and critical theory. In this particular program, students are exposed to many ideas that counter dominant their existing ideas about social norms and favor practices of critique. Because of this, students found that their own personal selves and their relationships were impacted by their growing knowledge base.

> 'It can be painful to look at yourself in the mirror and examine the same concepts that you criticize others for, you do yourself. But at the same time I feel like there's growth there because it is painful, and it's kind of metaphorical to the process of therapy. It's like you are going to have to examine painful things but then you can be resilient and grow from that.'

Another student reflected on how their personal life has been impacted:

> 'I'm not going lie my personal life has been affected. I definitely face that with my partner. I would try to voice my thoughts on things it would catch him off guard. [He would say] 'What are you reading? What are they teaching you there?' and it's like, we need to have this uncomfortable conversation.
> It was hard for me to face myself too in terms of the way I treat others. How you had to discuss what your own privileges are. I think being in a very liberal arts

> school we point the finger at others, but never really think too much to examine ourselves.'

Some students also felt that these ideas ignited possible change for how they can be:

> 'I view race in a completely different way in my own context and in my own life. It's not that before I didn't care, but I didn't see the oppression or privilege – it wasn't an issue for me. When we talk about this kind of stuff now, it brings up a lot of things like what could I have been doing more to contribute to my own race or ethnicity. It's a struggle. But it's enlightening. It has me thinking.'

This destabilization was not only reflective of the strong social justice and critical lenses in this program, but also generalized to being newly exposed to general family systems ideas.

> 'You kind of grow up to see that mental illness as an individual problem and once you get into this program – well, I guess family therapy programs in general, and learn the systemic point of view that involves the family – it definitely broadens your perspective a lot.'

The process of learning appeared to create new awareness and attention to aspects of individuals, families and societies that many students hadn't previously attended to. This destabilization process impacted students as they moved toward exploring the different theories.

Although it had been thought that students would not want to destabilize from the familiar in favor of practices of critique (Marsten & Howard, 2006), students were found to have a strong appreciation of their increasing awareness of social justice issues, even if it was not their focus entering the program. Although students did report that the destabilization changed their relationships and was difficult at times, they ended the quarter believing that it was important knowledge to have and they will be better people, and better therapists, as a result of the temporary destabilization.

**Worldview and Theory Adoption**

One of the main intentions of this study was to explore student experiences as they were introduced to multiple perspectives that included scientist-practitioner, critical theory, and postmodernism/social constructionism in the practice of family therapy and explore how and whether they gravitated toward one of these stances. When it came to favoring a theory, there were three main parts of their experiences. The first is that students came in with a worldview through which they evaluated the theories they learned. Secondly, as students moved through their first quarter, they were open to adapting their worldview as they learned new knowledge and theories. Lastly, students did not want to take a hard stance in one position (theory) or another.

As students learned new theoretical knowledge, they measured against their own *worldview* and resonated with theoretical approaches that fit their worldview, values and past experiences. They wanted to feel authentic as a therapist.

> 'I think it is important for me to choose something (a theory) that resonates and aligns with my values so that the therapist that I'm going to become is in line with who I am in general. So I don't have to put on a mask or feel uncomfortable in the therapy room. I think it's very important for me to be able to have that one person, the therapist, and the "me" be as congruent as possible.'

Some students found it easier to look at which theories *didn't* fit them, while remaining open to theories that seemed to fit who they wanted to be as therapists:

> 'I think just learning about all of these different theories has opened up my thinking and there are some that I automatically am just like "Well, that definitely doesn't suit me" and I'm leaning toward a certain perspective that has helped me understand the type of therapist that I think I want to become.'

Although it was important for students to experience some congruency of theoretical knowledge with closely held values and beliefs, students also reported that they experienced personal growth and broadened awareness through their first quarter. As a

result, they also communicated a willingness to be "open-minded" as they were introduced to new theories and ideas, while still measuring these new theories and ideas against their worldview.

> 'I'm going to school to be educated and incorporate *new* perspectives in order to do therapy effectively. But what brought me here to become a therapist is my life experience. I'm kind of coming here for refinement and things like that. So I'm certainly getting a lot of new tools to use. But I guess if they didn't correspond with my world view, lest my world view changes, which I'm open to, then I probably might use a piece of it, if it fits.'

Another student reflected on how expanded knowledge impacted their view of therapy:

> 'Prior to getting involved in and learning social justice ideas and that kind of stuff, it would have surprised me. But after participating and having those dialogues, it's like how could you not (incorporate them into therapy)?'

Similarly, a student looked to find a balance between being grounded in the worldview they came in with and adapting their worldview in response to new knowledge:

> 'This program has done a really good job of having us step and try and examine our world view and why we see things the way we do and challenge some of those things but it's still in there (world view), we can't separate from that fully.'

The students' worldviews and previous experiences clearly had an impact on student reactions and acceptance of different theoretical frameworks. Interestingly, many students in this study were resistant to committing to taking a stance in an epistemology or theory, in favor of either combing theory or being adaptive to the particular client.

> 'Yeah, I can see myself borrowing from both (modernist and postmodernist). Like, I feel like there's definitely some things that, I think, are dependent on the family that I'm working with. I feel like there are certain models that address things that I feel would be more helpful.'

Other students felt it was limiting to choose one theory:

> 'I am not going to limit myself to just choosing one, because I think that that will limit who I can help and how I can help them. But there are pieces of the different theories that I like. So I like the humanistic side of some theories, but I like the structural side of cognitive behavioral therapy. I like that Bowen goes into

> the past, because I think that the past has a lot to do with who you are as a person in the present. There are pieces of each one that I like. So I need to think more about what I really, really like and what I'm going to use in practice. But I'm not going to limit myself to just one.'

Other students felt that it was too early in their learning process to begin to gravitate toward one theory or another.

> 'I think, for me, because I still have a very limited understanding of all of them, I can just pick and choose things that make sense, even though they might be completely conflicting. I don't have a full enough grasp yet so I can say yeah, that makes sense to me or I can put these together.'

At this stage, students did not want to have to take a stance or position themselves within one epistemology or another. They did not even necessarily feel that these stances were contradicting; instead they appreciated the strengths that each offered and wondered about the possibilities of integrating them.

In general, when speaking about their experiences as new students in MFT, students appeared to be balancing their desires to stay true to themselves while also being stretched to learn and adapt to the new information and ideas they were being exposed to in their program, even as destabilizing as it may be for them. Interestingly, the students seem to be adept at holding multiple perspectives and opposing epistemologies at this stage of their learning. Students were seeing the many strengths of the different theoretical stances, had a desire to 'try them on', and were even starting to be curious about integrating the various approaches, including the modernist, postmodernist, critical and research-informed practices. This seems to reflect the type of "creative cross-talk" (Gergen, 2009, p. 218) that the field has been seeking to learn how to do.

### *Student Desires*

In addition to the themes of student experiences, there were also themes that emerged of what students believe would have supported them in their early learning processes in an MFT program. Two main themes emerged that reflected student desires: the need for scaffolding and the need to link theory and practice.

**Scaffolding**

An intention of this study was to look at the potential role that scaffolding might play in assisting new MFT students as they are introduced to competing epistemologies in MFT education, and what skills can educators develop as students navigate these varied, often conflicting, epistemological stances. It was found that the student responses strongly supported the need for scaffolding. The first thing we noticed was that students new to MFT theory, and the epistemological spectrum, struggled considerably at first:

> 'For me it was – I felt like I was in a field with very tall grass and I did not know where I was going and where all that was going. I'm like "If someone can just give me a view from above to know where I am in this field right now, it would make it a lot more bearable to be in the grass" and try to see "Okay, this is this theory" and so – it felt frustrating. I'm like "I have no idea-"'

In order to understand the theories in their context, students felt that what would have been helpful is to have an overview of all the theories and where they fit, before diving into the details of them:

> 'What would have helped with epistemological view is a big picture, here's where this is coming from, let's try to place it on a map. I felt that – a more dynamic – going back and forth – here's the big picture, let's zoom in, let's go back to the big picture as we go to the next therapy. Having more of a dynamic [conversation] so we understand and it sticks. Like, what's the origin of every theory.'

Even in the midst of the struggle of learning epistemology and new theories. Several

students had a sense of what would be helpful which was congruent with scaffolding theory. These students needed more direction in the beginning of this process, emphasizing a subject's active nature in their relations within the given (structured) environment (Moll, 2014). These students spoke of the need for *expert knowledge* coupled with a more directive teaching stance in the early stages of navigating these new ideas and theories:

> 'We have to kind of assume that we are all starting from a blank slate of knowledge. Because people who come from different fields aren't going necessarily have these backgrounds in knowing what postmodern and critical theory are. It would be nice if they would start with a foundation of the things you are going need to know which is what the textbook did, but I don't know if the professors necessarily did or embraced, or they assumed that the book would do that for us.'

Without first being *given* knowledge about theories, students found that being expected to have conversations and discussions so early on was difficult because they didn't feel they had a grasp of the basic information:

> 'Because we're novices it's kind of like novices helping novices, and maybe we'll all turn to diamonds eventually but it does seem like at a certain point– especially with stuff like talking about postmodernism and modernism. If students can't define those, then the teachers maybe have taken it for granted that it's assumed, which means there should have at least been a point when they (the teachers) were like, 'Just so everyone's on the same page, in case someone asks you if you're in a family therapy program you should know some basic tenants. Let's spend a little bit of time doing that [going over theory again] so everyone feels confident. Because sometimes I think the background assumption is like you already know this but then that weird secrecy where you're like well, I should have already known that so I'm not going say it since everyone else knows it. But no one knows it though, right?'

Although students did want to be given knowledge at the beginning and were asking for a more directive approach, they did so with the intention of adopting a more collaborative effort later:

> ‘We talk about challenges entering this very systemic-focused schooling where our classrooms are systemic like we don't have a clear power differential between the professors and the students sometimes and I want that at least upfront where the skill building needs to take place and then we can get into this after relationship building.’

These students were interested in letting teachers know that they could be trusted to make sense of these new ideas in their own ways eventually:

> ‘I think we’re all still trying to take them (the theories) in. And once we all learn them, I feel like, maybe year three, we’ll all get into dialogs about them. Not necessarily arguments, but dialogs about them. And that will be really helpful too, and I look forward to that. But for now, I think we’re all just sponges.’

One student gave an example of this:

> ‘There is a class where decolonization came up and one at a time we had to go around the room and say our opinion on that before we were ever introduced to what it was. That was pretty kind of intimidating. It definitely would have been nice to have an introduction first.’

Interestingly, some students experienced this as having social justice implications:

> ‘I really wish there was more of an introduction to these complex terms you’re going to hear…I see it kind of ironically like disenfranchising people that are not as academic, but have really valuable perspectives to offer.’

Another student spoke directly about scaffolding in relation to their concern for peers. They felt that given the diverse backgrounds of new students, more directive teaching at the start would provide equality in the classroom and give all students a common ground from which they could then evolve and reflect critically on and create new knowledge together:

> ‘I just think it’s ironic because we’re talking about people who, like a lot of our education so far has been talking about, people who don’t know how to access the school system and these other kinds of systems and don’t know how to work within that context. I see some people in our cohort that don’t really like maybe navigating the educational system, but they’re here because they bring a valuable perspective and they’re going to be great therapists. And it’s ironic to me that there’s no kind of like scaffolding for that.’

Students were interested in wanting to think more and dive deeper into exploring the nuances of the theories and their similarities and differences; however, not having received a basic overview of all the theories through directive teaching left them feeling ill-equipped to do so.

Vygotsky's scaffolding and zone of proximal development theory provided this study a lens which to focus on the interdependence of the process of development and the socially provided resources for that development (Moll, 2014). The students in this study strongly reflected the necessary role of scaffolding as they are introduced to MFT theory in their first quarter. The desire of MFT educators to take on a non-expert stance and be collaborative from the beginning can have the unintended effect of leaving students feeling lost and without a solid grasp of the basic information. Although students do appreciate getting to have conversations with each other and discussions in class, they want to do so after receiving a comprehensive overview of the information. After they feel grounded in the basic knowledge, students can then leap and flourish in discussions and critical thinking about the theories and concepts learned.

**Linking Theory to Practice**

Lastly, the students had a desire to learn more concretely about how to link theory to practice. At the program where the researcher conducted the focus groups, students do not start meeting with clients until two years into the program. This delay left many students frustrated as they were learning new theory:

> 'We are talking and learning about so many groups of people and so many ways to look at things and it's very easy to intellectualize. I think it's important to have this foundation, but I think being in direct contact with certain groups of people would help. We were talking about the gap between theory and practice. And it's

> one thing to learn about these things from books and try to spend time and reflect. But I think we can push it to the next level in terms of let's go out there and see how that works.'

Similarly, students felt that after receiving the information, they weren't sure how to use the information when actually working with people:

> 'I find it frustrating. I enjoy the lecture model but now that I have this information, what do we do about it? I learn through doing. I learn from actually doing something and that's what I feel is missing. Walk me through this, now that I know about white privilege, how do I address this with other people? I don't know how to say something.'

Even without having their own clients, students thought it would be helpful to see the theories and therapy in action. They would have been open to a variety ways of being able to see therapy:

> 'I realize that we have to learn a little bit of information before we can apply it but I feel like incorporating more concrete examples of how this [theory] is used and getting access very early to tapes of our professors doing counseling or of other students doing counseling and just having a better understanding of what that looks like, feels like, and sounds like. I have no idea at what point of our program we get to gain access to that kind of information.'

Another student felt that they were learning so much, but without being able to apply it in the near future, wondered if they would still remember the variety of theories and techniques learned in their first quarter:

> 'This is an awesome theory but like how do we do this? How do I put that into practice? How do I actually like work through it because I'm not really going remember it until I'm actually like going through the steps in doing it.'

Even though there was frustration on the part of students, several students spoke about how some educators integrated *real world* experiences and experiential activities, such as role-plays into the curriculum, which helped students to link the new theory they were learning into practice situations:

Researcher: So you found it helpful to bring real world experiences into the room when discussing theory?
Student #1: Essential.
Student #2: Also, we would do some role-plays. "Okay we're using this theory, here's the situation. Now, I want you to be the therapist and use this theory to address the issue". So you can really see how one theory would work as opposed to another. That was helpful.

In addition to role plays, students also appreciated examples:

> 'The way it gels in my brain the best is when the teacher of the class throws it into a real world situation – then in my brain I try to connect it. That's the best way for me to understand.'

One student gave an example of how even having to apply it through a paper was helpful:

> 'We had a write a paper about a couple theories for one class. I wanted to use one theory but I found that it was hard to apply for what problems I had. At first, I was like this is cool. I liked it in class. I wanted to try it out, but it just might not be my thing.'

Students in this program expressed some frustration that they were learning valuable information, but that they would not be able to apply it to clients until two years into the program. They reflected on the necessity for their educators to connect the theories that they were learning to concrete examples or role plays in order for them to understand how it worked in reality. Students found themselves wishing that they could have seen more videos, demonstrations or had the chance to practice it themselves in order to be able to feel more confident in knowing that the theory looks like in practice.

In summary, this study looked at the experiences of students as they navigated their first quarter of an MFT program, attempting to learn the potentially conflicting theories grounded in scientist-practitioner, critical theory, and postmodernism/social constructionism lenses. As was expected, students experienced some destabilizing effects in their personal lives, and also drew on their own worldviews when exploring the

various theories they were being presented. There were areas that emerged in which students desired something different from their program. The first was a desire for more scaffolding when entering the program, and the second was to have more of an emphasis on linking theory and practice. All these themes have several important implications for MFT programs and the processes that take place as students are introduced to the field of marriage and family therapy and its many diverse theories and practices.

## Discussion

Scholarly questions that can be asked in the scholarship of teaching and learning can be classified into four types (Hutchings, 2000): a) What works?, b) What is?, c) Visions of the possible, and d) Theory building. In that spirit this paper presents a framework of *What Is* in MFT education. In the effort to describe *What Is,* the central concern of this study was pedagogical practices in family therapy and the effects of these practices as described by MFT students. Although the lens of this study is through student experiences, the researcher's main focus was to track and detail the forms these practices take, or how they may be developed in the future, rather than how students adopt a particular theory for example.

The student's reports within the focus groups provided several themes that stood out as they were introduced to multiple perspectives that included scientist-practitioner, critical theory, and postmodernism/social constructionism in the practice of family therapy (see *Table 1*).

The first dominant theme was the request for more direction in the process of learning any new theory, paradigm, or social justice approach. This finding is congruent with Vygotsky's scaffolding theory. These students needed more direction in the

beginning of this process of learning new ideas, emphasizing a subject's active nature in their relations within the given (structured) environment (Moll, 2014). These students spoke of the need for *expert knowledge* coupled with a more directive teaching stance in the early stages of navigating these new ideas and theories, and were okay with positioning themselves in a position with less power in that effort. Similar to the discussions around *theories* and *worldviews*, it would seem these students were confident in their ability to make sense of the new ideas and integrate them in a way that worked for them, after receiving *expert knowledge* on the subject matter form the educators.

Another related finding that informs pedagogical practice was the student's strong desire to have MFT educators link theory to practice as they teach the many different theories to new students. Together with the students' desire for *expert knowledge* and a directive teaching stance, this idea further points toward the need for a more developmental approach to MFT education. Being introduced from the onset in how the various theories translate into practice would support students in being able to understand the relevance and importance of theories and their differences to practice. In this study, it seems that students are asking educators to integrate scaffolding approaches, in all subject matter in an effort to better retain what is being taught. Although students appreciate the collaborative approach of educators that privilege their expertise as students, they first want to be able to feel grounded in the basic information in the field. After this directive teaching, students would feel more comfortable being able to have conversations, practice with each other and think critically about the different theories and how they work in practice.

**Table 1.** Findings of Student Experiences and Desires

| **Findings** | **Sample Quotes** |
|---|---|
| Desire for Development Model of Pedagogical Practices | *"I felt like I was in a field with very tall grass and I did not know where I was going."*<br><br>*"I want that at least upfront where the skill building needs to take place and then we can get into this after relationship building."*<br><br>*"I think we're all still trying to take them (the theories) in. And once we all learn them, maybe year three, we'll all get into dialogs about them."* |
| Need to Link Theory to Practice | *"The way it gels in my brain the best is when the teacher of the class throw it into a real world situation – then in my brain I try to connect it"*<br><br>*"I think it's important to have this foundation, but I think being in direct contact with certain groups of people would help"* |
| Need for Support through Destabilization | *"I'm not going to lie, my personal life has been affected. I definitely face that with my partner"*<br><br>*"It can be painful to look at yourself in the mirror…but at the same time I feel like there's growth there because it is painful"* |
| Desire to Adopt Integrative Stance | *"I am not going to limit myself to just choosing one, because I think that that will limit who I can help and how I can help them. But there are pieces of the different theories that I like"*<br><br>*"Yeah, I can see myself borrowing from both (modernist and postmodernist). Like, I feel like there's definitely some things that, I think, are dependent on the family that I'm working with. I feel like there are certain models that address things that I feel would be more helpful."* |

As proposed earlier in this paper that to ask students to set aside dominate ideas about social norms, in favor of practices of critique, may have the potential for destabilization of long held world-views and ways of interacting in the world. This

proved to be accurate for many of the students. Although they appreciated the personal growth they felt they were experiencing with the destabilization, many of them found outlets outside of the academic setting to support them in the midst of this difficult time. . This finding raises the question: How might MFT educators do a better job of creating holding environments for students in these academic settings while have these difficult conversations? This finding would seem to shine a light on the need for MFT educators to do a better job of attending to student experiences if they are going to adopt a social justice lens or work toward raising critical consciousness in MFT students. There are effects to these good intentions and it is necessary for future research in the areas of MFT pedagogy to look at how to best support students through these experiences.

Another interesting finding was the extent of the student intentions toward adopting integrative practice. Despite most MFT programs being grounded in *schools of treatment* or therapeutic models (Sprenkle, Davis & Lebow, 2009), students took a counter position and spoke of the desire to adopt a more integrative stance as their professional identities formed. They were willing and wanting to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. This development speaks to the need for MFT educators to let go of their hardened stances and rethink pedagogical approaches weighted toward privileging walled-off epistemologies and/or specific therapeutic models, and consider adopting a *hybrid* pedagogical framework, or something akin to a common factors or *informed* eclecticism (Sprenkle, Davis & Lebow, 2009) approach to MFT pedagogy.

There are several limitations to this study. These limitations include a small sample size that was drawn from one particular setting specifically focused on social

justice in MFT education. Thus it will be hard to capture the full range of issues that other settings without this social justice focus might encounter.

Another limitation was that all the interviews took place over the first quarter of student exposure to theory. Because of the timing of the interviews, it appeared difficult for students to think critically and compare theories. Students did not feel they had an in-depth knowledge at the time of the interviews that allowed them to think about theory at a level they would have preferred.

Thematic narrative analysis has some limitations. The role of the researcher as narrator and constructor of the narratives that are analyzed can appear obscure (Riessman, 2008), and there is also considerable variation in how researchers may define particular narrative units (Riessman, 2008).

Possible future directions of research would be to include larger sample sizes from multiple MFT programs to test if experiences across contexts are similar or different. We would also be interested to hold similar focus groups at later stages in MFT programs to see how these findings change over time or solidify.

In conclusion, the world that awaits the MFT student is changing at a rapid pace and provides many challenges, as well as opportunities. This study points toward several pedagogical approaches to deal with both the expansion of the field into new domains, and MFT education's move to a core competencies model of education.

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# CHAPTER 7

# DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

New models and conceptual frameworks enrich the scholarship of teaching and learning and extend its boundaries (Hutchings, 2000). Schools are epistemological training grounds that shape and change beliefs of developing students (Schraw, 2001). Existing research invites schools to make the effort to change beliefs in positive ways, although it is less clear how those changes should occur (Schraw, 2001).

Scholarly questions that can be asked in the scholarship of teaching and learning can be classified into four types (Hutchings, 2000): a) What works?, b) What is?, c) Visions of the possible, and d) Theory building. In that spirit this research presented a *vision of the possible* in MFT education and epistemological development, and a conceptual framework for day-to-day educational practice. We did this through a practice of *hybridization* that brings together multiple ideas, and frameworks.

## Epistemology in MFT Education

Epistemology is the study of *knowledge*, its *acquisition* and its *limits* (Cullin, 2014). Even though we currently understand that epistemology beliefs are related to argumentative reasoning, deeper comprehension of text, moral reasoning, and greater acquisition of knowledge, few researchers have attempted to translate these findings into suggestions for day-to-day educational practice (Schraw, 2001).

Family therapy is grounded in a particular *way of thinking*, therefore learning family therapy, and teaching it, has to be approached differently (Cullin 2014). When we teach family therapy (*way of thinking*) or epistemology, we must do so in ways that are understandable and relevant, and that can be grounded in real practice (Cullin, 2014).

Developmental epistemology can be defined as the study of how a person's construction of knowledge and knowing evolves over time (MacAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). A developmental epistemological approach is important to consider because linkages have been found between developmental epistemology and effective counseling behavior (MacAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). In regards to family therapy outcomes, more outcome-related research is required to understand how therapists' epistemological beliefs impact the successfulness of work with therapy clients (Lee, Niemeyer, and Rice, 2013).

Recent studies and meta-analyses of counseling effectiveness support a shift toward "developmentalizing" aspects of counselor preparation, that an effort be made to assist students to expand their epistemological perspectives, and that both support of a current epistemology and challenge to that way of thinking are necessary for growth in the counseling field (MacAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). The findings of our research make a strong case for the developmental approach outlined throughout this study.

## Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for teaching and learning in family therapy education. The researcher anticipates several outcomes from this research including:

- Practice-based evidence and experiential data that will lead into new forms of pedagogical practice.
- The development of a best practices framework based on these findings and delivery workshops for family therapist educators working in academic and training related settings.

- Additional training-oriented, publishable articles from this research will also be developed.

The researcher sees this project, driven by student experiences, leading to new developmental pedagogy practices, which at this time will be titled the Developmental Pedagogy Model. This stems from one of the main findings of this research that the students felt it was necessary to have more directive teaching at the beginning of the program that could lead to more collaborative learning as they progress through the program. The Developmental Pedagogy Model of MFT education teaching method will require a spirit of action, collaboration, and flexibility from the MFT educator and we believe this study provides the beginnings of a map and conceptual framework to support this pedagogical spirit.

The findings of this study have several important contributions to the Developmental Pedagogy Model as it is formed. In addition to demonstrating the need for it, students want an emphasis on both theory and practice simultaneously. This could include more experiential exercises in the classroom, demonstrations or examples from actual clients. It will also be necessary to build in support for the self of the developing therapist, given the destabilization that can take place as students are exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking. Lastly, the findings show that a spirit of integration and openness to holding multiple perspectives, on the part of the educators, will be an important foundation for students as they develop into informed and skilled clinicians.

We believe that the data pulled from this study challenges educators from all epistemological positions. For those MFT educators with more scientist-practitioner leanings, it asks for an adaption of both critical pedagogy and postmodern pedagogy best

practices. For the more postmodern or critical leaning MFT educators it provides an invitation to revisit ideas and approaches that may have been opposed (and regularly critiqued) in the past. It also asks the more collaboratively oriented educators to consider taking a more directive or foundational position in the early stages of scaffolding new knowledge.

The Developmental Pedagogy Model in MFT will ask MFT educators to recognize that critical academic discourse is based on and grounded in disagreement and that this antagonistic foundation continues to create barriers to developing creative compromises, or from generating innovative hybrid perspectives that draw from different points of view, thus locking us into reactionary and oppositional stances that harm us as students, teachers, scholars, and colleagues (Keating, 2013).

The world that awaits the MFT student is changing at a rapid pace and provides many challenges, as well as opportunities. There are few guides for teachers in how to prepare students to navigate this changing landscape. This study will provide a closer view of students experiences in MFT education leading to new pedagogical practices to deal with both the expansion of the field into new domains and MFT education's move to a core competencies model of education. This study can facilitate pedagogic change, offer students a voice, and provide them the ability to influence how their learning happens.

## Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is that it drew from a small sample from one MFT program with a particular focus on issues of social justice. Thus it is hard to capture the full range of issues that other settings might encounter or attempt to generalize findings to

other MFT programs. Thematic narrative analysis has some limitations. The role of the researcher as narrator and constructor of the narratives that are analyzed can appear obscure (Riessman, 2008). There is also considerable variation in how researchers may define particular narrative units (Riessman, 2008). Possible future directions of research would be to include larger sample sizes from multiple MFT programs and also track longitudinal changes over the course of a full MFT program.

### *Future Research*

Our findings lead us to consider a number of exciting directions for future research. To begin, the first dominant theme was the request for more direction in the process of learning any new theory, paradigm, or social justice approach, leaving us wondering how students might talk about this later on in the program, or what new requests might emerge one or two years into the educational process? A more longitudinal approach to this research could be quite fruitful in gathering more information in what works best throughout time.

Students also spoke of a strong desire to have MFT educator's link theory to practice as they teach the many different theories to new students. Future research could be helpful in pointing the way in what is most effective for students when trying to present "real-world" situations, or link theory to practice.

Additional future research avenues include looking more closely at the real effects of destabilization on students when long held world-views and ways of interacting in the world are challenged for the first time in an MFT program. From this research practice

guides could be developed that provide day-to-day frameworks for establishing a holding environment and utilizing a scaffolding approach through this difficult process.

Further, we find it important to identify how students hold on to, or move away from, intentions toward adopting integrative practice. Because developmental pedagogy approach is interested in removing barriers to developing creative compromises in MFT education, and generating innovative hybrid perspectives that draw from different points of view. We would be interested in what supports this blending of epistemological stances as time goes on in these students program, and how educators might support this spirit of *informed* eclecticism (Sprenkle, Davis & Lebow, 2009).

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