

Theory Integration Paper

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Introduction

Counseling didn't come out of nowhere for me. Long before I entered this program, I kept finding myself drawn to conversations where the presenting problem was only the doorway to the real, raw, human issues underneath. A design problem was a human needs problem. A leadership problem was a clarity problem. A faith problem was a grief, shame, or identity problem. Over time, I began to realize that helping people through personal transformation wasn't a side interest. It was a throughline. Counselor training is taking that throughline and giving it discipline, language, humility, and structure.

My current theoretical orientation is integrative and draws most directly from existential, Gestalt, solution-focused, multicultural, and person-centered therapies, while also selectively leaning on family systems, strengths-based, cognitive, behavioral, narrative, and reality/choice approaches (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2022). My emerging integrative approach is built on what I call my "Illuminate" model (see Figure 1) and is human-centered, meaning-driven, context-aware, emotionally present, and action-oriented without becoming rushed, reductive, or coercive.

Figure 1
Matthew Doty's "Illuminate" Consulting Model



Note. The "Illuminate" model was originally developed in my design leadership consulting work and is being adapted here as an emerging integrative counseling framework.

My Worldview

My worldview begins with the belief that people have inherent dignity before they perform, improve, explain themselves, or become easier to understand. This belief is shaped by my faith, my life experience, and my developing counseling identity. I don't believe clients should have to convince me their pain matters or shrink their story to be treated with care. Rogers's person-centered emphasis on empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard fits naturally with this view because it places the client's personhood at the center of therapeutic change (Rogers, 1957).

I also see people as meaning-making beings. Symptoms matter, and reducing suffering matters, but people can't be fully understood through symptoms alone. Existential therapy resonates with me because it builds on concepts like freedom, responsibility, limitation, mortality, authenticity, and meaning (Yalom, 1980). Multicultural counseling matters to me because people don't enter the room apart from culture, identity, family, community, and lived reality (Sue & Sue, 2016). Gestalt therapy adds a complementary lens by emphasizing present-moment awareness, embodiment, and what's happening now (Perls et al., 1951). My faith deepens these perspectives and is central to my worldview, but faith-informed counseling isn't the same thing as imposing faith on clients. My beliefs may shape the kind of presence I offer, but counseling shouldn't become a place where clients are pressured to adopt my conclusions. Together, these perspectives represent my worldview well and keep me from treating people as abstract problems.

My Family/Community's View of the World

Family Life

Family life gave me a relational view of the world. People are formed in relationship, not in isolation, a view consistent with family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974). Twenty-nine years of marriage and raising three children into adulthood have given me a front-row seat to how love, conflict, responsibility, repair, disappointment, loyalty, and growth actually work over time. Family has shown

me that people can care deeply and still misunderstand each other, struggle to act in love, and repeat old patterns even after insight. This has shaped my belief that change is rarely clean or linear. Raising children into adulthood also shaped how I understand agency. Parenting required a continual shift from directing to guiding, from protecting to trusting, from solving problems to helping them develop their own judgment. My developing theory attempts to leave room for the slow, relational nature of growth.

Faith and Church Community

My faith and church community have shaped the moral center of my worldview. The concepts of dignity, agency, covenant, service, accountability, repentance, forgiveness, and redemption are all central to my spiritual DNA. From this community comes an important operating principle: *people aren't merely problems to be solved; they're spiritual siblings with inherent value and eternal potential*. Church service has also exposed me to ministerial moments and pastoral conversations around grief, shame, faith questions, marriage strain, parenting concerns, identity questions, discouragement, responsibility, and hope. These experiences are teaching me that people often need space before they need direction. They need to hear themselves tell the truth, be treated with seriousness, and have someone stay present without rushing what is still unfolding.

At the same time, my church community has taught me that belonging is complicated. Faith communities can provide identity, purpose, service, support, and spiritual grounding. They can also create pressure, silence, fear of disappointing others, or confusion when someone's lived experience doesn't fit neatly inside communal expectations. That complexity has shaped my desire to show up as someone who doesn't treat faith community as either automatically healing or automatically harmful. I want to understand what role it actually plays in a person's life.

Professional Design and Leadership Community

My professional community gave me a systems-aware and human-centered view of the world. A frustrated customer, stalled team, broken workflow, or unclear product strategy usually pointed to

deeper human needs, unspoken assumptions, misaligned incentives, organizational fear, or a system that made the desired behavior difficult. Decades of user interviews, team critiques, stakeholder conversations, and leadership work trained me to slow down, listen closely, identify patterns, and reframe problems before trying to solve them.

That professional world also shaped my language for helping. I learned to guide discovery rather than dictate answers. I learned that people often become unstuck when the right question helps them see what was already there but not yet clear. I learned to hold complexity without immediately collapsing it into a simple answer. Those instincts became the original soil for my “Illuminate” model. In consulting, the model helped leaders and teams see what was happening, make sense of complexity, and move toward clearer action.

Leadership also shaped my understanding of power. Building and leading teams taught me that people’s behavior is affected by what a system rewards, punishes, ignores, or makes costly. People may appear resistant, disengaged, anxious, or difficult when they’re actually responding reasonably to the environment around them. That lens matters to my emerging theory because I don’t want to interpret a person apart from the context they’ve had to survive, navigate, or adapt to.

My Views of Human Development

I view human development as a lifelong process of becoming. Adulthood does not mark the end of formation; it simply changes the terrain. Identity, vocation, faith, marriage, parenting, grief, friendship, health, responsibility, and loss continue shaping people across the lifespan. Erikson’s developmental theory is helpful because it recognizes psychosocial tasks beyond childhood (Erikson, 1963). My own vocational reorientation has made this especially clear. I don’t see later adulthood as disengagement. I see it as a period where meaning, generativity, integrity, and calling can deepen.

Development happens through relationships, roles, crises, context, and meaning-making. Attachment theory helps explain how early relationships shape expectations about safety, closeness,

dependence, and emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1988). Family systems perspectives add that people are formed within relational patterns, not as isolated units (Minuchin, 1974). Reality Therapy and Choice Theory also resonate with me because they emphasize choice, responsibility, needs, and effective action (Glasser, 1998; Wubbolding, 2011). Together, these perspectives support my belief that human development involves both agency and context. People often need to recover a sense of agency, but agency should not be treated as if people choose from a blank slate. Family systems, trauma, culture, faith, economics, attachment, health, and power all shape what choices feel available.

I also believe development requires people to integrate thought, emotion, body, and story. Cognitive insight matters, but it is not the whole of growth (Beck, 2011). People often need to move from analyzing their lives to recognizing what they feel, what they've lost, what they want, and what they fear. Gestalt therapy's attention to present-moment awareness and embodiment supports this view, while narrative therapy adds the importance of story. White and Epston (1990) emphasized externalizing problems and helping clients re-author their stories. That fits my view that development often involves naming what has shaped a person without reducing the person to those forces. A client may not be "broken"; they may be grieving, adapting, protecting, protesting, surviving, or longing.

My Views of the Therapist as a Person

Skills and theories matter, but clients aren't helped by technique alone. They're helped by a real person who can offer presence, warmth, humility, attention, boundaries, and care. Rogers (1957) argued that the therapist's congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard are central to therapeutic change. That resonates with the kind of counselor I want to become.

The phrase that best describes the presence I want to offer is *serious warmth*. Serious warmth isn't detached expertise, and it isn't vague niceness. It's generous grace with gravity: listening carefully, asking thoughtful questions, respecting pain, noticing strength, and treating the client as a full person. It

also means being willing to challenge when challenge serves the client's growth. I want clients to experience me as kind, grounded, honest, and attentive.

I'm also learning that the therapist needs to remain teachable and aware of their own limits. In counseling role plays, feedback has helped me notice strengths, such as open-ended questions, rapport, and pattern reflection, while also identifying growth areas, such as concise responses, emotional reflection, trusting silence, and closing sessions more intentionally. Consultation is also becoming part of my understanding of ethical practice, especially when cultural complexity, value conflict, risk, or countertransference may be present (Corey et al., 2019). In my trauma-informed training, I've also identified patterns I need to monitor: over-responsibility, cognitive over-processing, and withdrawal or emotional fatigue. Caring for others requires ongoing practices of self-awareness, support, balance, and centering (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009).

My View on the Process of Psychotherapy

I view psychotherapy as a relationship and process that helps people become more aware, more honest, more capable, and more connected. People often come to therapy because something feels stuck, painful, confusing, or unlivable. The work begins by creating enough safety and attention for clients to notice what's happening in them and around them. Psychotherapy also helps clients make meaning. This is where existential therapy strongly shapes my view of the process. Therapy should give people room to face anxiety, limitation, freedom, responsibility, and loss without reducing those realities to symptoms alone (Yalom, 1980). Sometimes that means clarifying what they value, grieving what cannot be changed, admitting what they have avoided, or choosing who they want to become in response to what life has handed them.

Good therapy also attends to the present moment. Gestalt therapy reminds me that insight is not only intellectual. People reveal themselves in tone, posture, pace, silence, avoidance, humor, tension, and the way they relate in the room (Perls et al., 1951). I want my sessions to help clients notice

those lived patterns with curiosity rather than shame. What is happening right now can become a doorway into what has been happening for years. Solution-focused therapy also contributes a practical hopefulness by attending to exceptions, strengths, resources, desired outcomes, and small next steps (De Jong & Berg, 2013). Multicultural counseling keeps that hopefulness grounded by asking how culture, identity, power, family, community, and social reality shape the client's experience (Sue & Sue, 2016). Change becomes more honest when therapy honors both what clients can choose and what they have had to carry. I believe psychotherapy should move outward into life. Family systems theory reminds me that people don't change in isolation; personal change affects and is affected by the relational systems where people live (Minuchin, 1974). The goal isn't just relief inside the counseling room. Psychotherapy should help change become embodied in actual relationships and daily life.

My Own Integrative Approach to Therapy

My "Illuminate" model began as a consulting framework for helping leaders and teams get unstuck, but counseling training has deepened and reshaped it around my theoretical orientation (see Table 1). In its emerging therapeutic form, the model is organized around four movements: Illuminate, Evaluate, Activate, and Radiate (see Figure 2). I see this as a living current rather than a rigid staircase. Clients may move back and forth between the movements many times. The model gives me a practical structure without forcing therapy into a mechanical sequence.

Table 1

Matthew's Theoretical Orientation Mapped to the "Illuminate" Model.

Orientation	Illuminate	Evaluate	Activate	Radiate
Integrative Therapy	Uses multiple lenses to see the whole picture.	Adapts to the person, context, culture, and need.	Selects interventions that fit the moment.	Connects individual change to relational, spiritual, professional, and systemic impact.
Existential Therapy	Clarifies meaning, freedom, responsibility, anxiety, limitation, and truth.	Helps clients face choice, responsibility, and what life is asking of them.	Encourages ownership, courage, and chosen action.	Supports a clearer life stance that affects relationships, vocation, faith, and identity.
Gestalt Therapy	Brings present-moment awareness to what is happening now.	Uses awareness, embodiment, and contact to understand lived experience.	Activates through experiments, expression, and integration.	Supports internal integration that can move outward into life.

Solution-Focused Therapy	Notifies exceptions, strengths, resources, desired outcomes, and what is already working.	Clarifies what progress would look like from the client's perspective.	Moves quickly toward small, practical next steps.	Allows small changes to spread into relationships and systems.
Multicultural Counseling	Illuminates context, power, identity, culture, lived experience, and assumptions.	Grounds meaning-making in lived social and cultural realities.	Supports client goals, advocacy, empowerment, and contextual action.	Connects personal healing to family, community, systems, and justice.
Person-Centered Therapy	Creates the safety needed for clients to see themselves honestly.	Offers empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard.	Trusts client growth while supporting movement at the client's pace.	Helps clients become more congruent with themselves and others.
Supporting Lenses	Family systems, narrative, strengths-based, cognitive, behavioral, and Reality Therapy/Choice Theory approaches add context, story, skills, action, and agency.			

Note. This table summarizes the main theories shaping my emerging integrative approach. The first six rows reflect my strongest orientations, while the final row names additional lenses I draw from.

Illuminate: Seeing Before Solving

Illuminate means helping clients see what is actually happening before moving too quickly toward interpretation or action. Person-centered therapy provides the relational safety for honest self-exploration. Gestalt therapy brings attention to present-moment experience. Existential therapy helps clarify meaning, anxiety, responsibility, and limitation. Multicultural counseling helps illuminate context, identity, culture, power, and lived reality. Narrative therapy helps identify the stories that shape how clients understand themselves. However, illumination requires more than insight. It requires emotional presence, embodied awareness, cultural humility, and respect for the client's pace.

Evaluate: Honest Meaning-Making Without Shame

Evaluate means helping clients make sense of what has been illuminated. The goal is not to judge the client, debate their experience, or force certainty. The goal is to examine what is true, what is assumed, what is feared, what is valued, what is possible, and what belongs to the client to carry. Existential therapy is central here because it asks clients to face meaning, freedom, responsibility, anxiety, and limitation. Multicultural counseling is also essential because meaning is never made in a vacuum. Culture, family, faith, identity, power, and community all shape what a person believes is possible or permissible. Cognitive approaches also help clients examine interpretations and beliefs. Narrative therapy helps them separate identity from problem-saturated stories. Reality Therapy and

Choice Theory help clarify needs, choices, and responsibility. For me, this movement is especially important because clients often suffer under the burden of false certainty. Fear can present itself as fact, shame as responsibility, and avoidance as wisdom. Evaluation helps clients slow down enough to distinguish data from interpretation, responsibility from shame, and ambiguity from certainty.

Activate: Moving Toward Responsible, Values-Aligned Action

Activate means helping clients move toward action that is clearer, healthier, and more aligned with their values. Solution-focused therapy seems especially important in this movement because it notices strengths, exceptions, resources, preferred futures, and small next steps. Strengths-based, behavioral, cognitive, and Reality Therapy/Choice Theory approaches also contribute here by offering practical tools for change. Activate needs to remain collaborative and well-paced. Some clients will need encouragement to act. Others will need permission to slow down because action has become reactive, compulsive, or fear-driven. The goal is not movement for movement's sake. The goal is restored agency: helping clients choose their next step with greater honesty, responsibility, and care.

Radiate: Moving Change Outward into Life

Therapy is not complete when a client has an insight or completes an intervention. Change radiates when clients become more honest, connected, responsible, emotionally present, free, loving, and grounded in their actual lives. This movement draws from multicultural, family systems, existential, strengths-based, and person-centered perspectives. Multicultural counseling reminds me that healing is connected to family, community, and systems. Family systems perspectives help me recognize that personal change affects relational patterns. Existential therapy asks whether a person's life stance is becoming clearer and more authentic. Person-centered therapy reminds me that congruence should affect how a person lives and relates. In this sense, therapy is not only private relief. It can become a source of relational and communal repair.

Figure 2
Matthew Doty's Emerging "Illuminate" Counselling Model



Note. The Illuminate model organizes my emerging integrative approach around four therapeutic movements. The model is presented as a flexible sequence rather than a rigid clinical formula.

Conclusion

I believe people have inherent dignity, develop across the lifespan, make meaning in relationship and context, and retain some capacity for agency even when life is painful or constrained. I believe therapy should help clients become more aware, more honest, more capable, and more connected. My "Illuminate" model gives shape to that belief and my emerging integrative approach to counseling. It helps me integrate the theories that most strongly fit my developing orientation.

I'm becoming a counselor who values serious warmth, ethical humility, emotional presence, structured reflection, and responsible action. My training is helping me see that good instincts aren't enough. I need theory, ethics, consultation, feedback, self-awareness, humility, and sustainable self-care. I also need to keep growing in my ability to reflect emotion, trust silence, pace my responses, and remain present without rushing to connect every dot. Ultimately, counseling doesn't feel like a departure from the work I've been doing. It feels like a deeper, more disciplined, more ethically grounded, and more sacred form of it. My hope is to offer counseling where clients don't have to prove their pain matters, where truth and compassion belong together, where faith and meaning can be explored without coercion, and where insight leads toward a more honest and responsible life.

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