

Making Sense of All the Theories: Psychotherapy, the Holy Spirit and the Experiential Learning Cycle

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About the Presenter:

Lois Dodds is President and Director of Heartstream Resources, a ministry serving cross-cultural workers. She and her husband Lawrence served for 23 years with Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, including thirteen years in the Amazon jungle of Peru. During these years Lois served in various support roles, including human resources and personnel, as the school and community counselor, as a high school teacher, and as a writer in anthropology and linguistics. Larry served as physician for the members of SIL and WBT and other missions, as well as caring for the indigenous peoples of Peru and overseeing health training programs.

Lois, a graduate of Westmont College, earned an M.A. in education, with an emphasis in human development, from Azusa Pacific University, an M.A. in confluent education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the Ph.D. in psychology and education at UCSB. She is the author of ten books and about 100 articles. She served in WBT's candidate selection and training program, Quest, for several years, and in this program and others counseled and taught nearly a thousand mission candidates.

Both Lois and Larry are adjunct professors in the summers with Azusa Pacific University's overseas extension Masters Program, Operation Impact. They teach a variety of courses and subjects related to leadership, including human development, whole person studies, spiritual formation, ethics, creative leadership, and counseling. They have taught cross-cultural workers from dozens of organizations in more than twenty countries.

The Dodds have three children and seven grandchildren. Their daughter and her husband are missionaries in Peru. Their son David is an anthropologist, and son Michael is a Ph.D. candidate in musicology at Eastman School of Music.

Heartstream Resources is a non-profit organization serving the needs of cross-cultural workers around the world. The four purposes are to provide programs of restoration and renewal for cross-cultural workers wounded or depleted in service, to provide education/prevention programs, to assist mission agency leaders through education and consultation, and to research matters related to cross-cultural ministry.

Heartstream Resources was incorporated in 1992 by a group of missionaries from several countries. Planning is underway for the development of a residential center in central rural Pennsylvania.

Making Sense of All the Theories: Psychotherapy, the Holy Spirit and the Experiential Learning Cycle

Perhaps you have wondered how to make sense of the plethora of approaches and theories of counseling. One recent count brings the number to 400.ⁱ Another estimate is up to 800! New approaches constantly spring up to compensate for oversights or inadequacies of existing theories. If we see these as isolated and unrelated it is, in fact, a perplexing prospect to attempt to understand them and their usefulness. I want to offer here a simple scheme for making sense of them by showing how various approaches to psychotherapy relate to our natural, experiential learning cycle--what I call the ABC's of natural learning.

In 1980 I was teaching high school seniors about self-esteem from a Biblical perspective. My class work with them became an exciting project as I saw them grow from learning what the Scriptures have to say about who they are. I wanted a simple model to show them how they could live up to all that God intends for them as His children, empowered by His Holy Spirit. I created my ABC's for Change model at that time.ⁱⁱ Later I designed a similar model, the M&M Model for Change, as part of my dissertation work in the role of the Holy Spirit in personality growth and change.ⁱⁱⁱ Both of these, plus seeking a visual model to illustrate the relationship between theories while teaching counseling, led me to placing them on the natural cycle of learning. We live this cycle repeatedly, from the time we begin to learn in infancy. In education we call it the experiential learning cycle.

Let me illustrate how experience leads us into a cycle of natural learning. Chrissie is a three year old. At supper she spills her milk. Mother is very angry, screaming in her face, "You are so clumsy! You make my life so difficult! Sometimes I wish you hadn't been born." Terrified, Chrissie feels the threat and pain of her mother's anger. She believes her words, and begins to feel dreadful, knowing (mental construct) she causes her mother trouble and it would be better if she didn't exist. Her thinking at age three is very literal; she takes the words at face value, unable to differentiate her mother's exhausted rage reaction from her rational good times. Chrissie now carries with her the feeling of being unworthy and shameful, guilt for her clumsiness and very being. She decides, "Mother doesn't want me. I must avoid her wrath by never being bad again!" Chrissie's future perceptions of her mother's responses to her are based on this experience and its outcomes in feelings and thoughts. So too her behavior, which becomes perfectionistic. Later she will have to "unlearn" her beliefs, or re-learn, discovering that mother

ⁱ Miller, Scott, Hubble, Mark, and Duncan, Barry. 1995. No more bells and whistles. *Family Therapy Networker*. March/April. pp. 53-63.

ⁱⁱ Dodds, Lois. 1980. *How Do I Look from Up There: You, from God's Point of View*. Wheaton: Scripture Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dodds, Lois. 1992. *The perception and experience of supernatural spiritual power for personality growth and change: an analysis of twelve life histories*. University of California, Santa Barbara. Available through University Microfilms, International. Summary presented at AACC II International Congress on Christian Counseling available on tape from the AACC or paper from the author.

really did love her but was reacting in rage due to her own problems.

The same event, spilling his milk, happens to Alex, also age three, but it brings about very different outcomes. Also age three, Alex spills his milk. Mother says, “Alex, please put your cup away from the edge of the table, like this, so it won’t spill.” Alex thinks, “I can put my cup back here. I can be careful not to spill.” He learns to place his cup differently, and has no residual feelings or negative mental constructs to undo later.

In my ABC’s of Change for high school students I described action, belief and consequences as the cycle we live out. By interrupting the cycle through believing or acting differently, we create new consequences. For example, if we don’t like the guilt we feel after we are rude to someone, we decide to act more graciously and then we achieve a better consequence (good relationship, positive feelings.) In my M & M Model for Change I describe motivation, means, and model as key elements in the change process. In the ABC’s of natural learning I identify affective, behavioral and cognitive elements of change. These of course fit on the same cycle as the ABC’s of Change. The two models can be superimposed or placed one inside another.

The **affective** phase of the learning cycle includes emotions, attitudes and motivations of the heart. **Behavioral** includes our own actions and those of others, including events, experiences and situations. **Cognitive** includes beliefs, mental constructs derived from experience, worldview, operating principles (both conscious and unconscious), automatic thinking (though patterns and habits). In the ABC’s of Change model, consequences includes affective, cognitive and behavioral outcomes, such as changes in relationship. Consequences are both the outcomes of experience and the originating influences in later experience.

When we are learning we naturally go through a round or cycle of experience, altering some phase of the cycle by changing our feelings, thinking new thoughts, gaining insight, or behaving to get a more desirable outcome. In education, we attribute theories or principles as derived from experience--we “make sense” of our perceptions by hypothesizing origins and reasons. Different outcomes are discovered through trying different behaviors, such as a scientific experiment. When we fail to examine the outcomes of our behavior, no learning occurs. We go on repeating a cycle with habitual elements of feeling, thinking and behaving. When the habitual elements are negative, we are “stuck” or in bondage to a pattern.

In order to break free of become “unstuck” we must be sufficiently motivated to introduce something new into the cycle. For example, pain may motivate us to want a different outcome. Motivation (desire, affect) may prompt us to try new behavior. Yet it alone is not sufficient. We may want a different outcome yet fail to change because we lack energy, power, or other resources (such as a better model).

Recent research on the effectiveness of psychotherapy indicates that various approaches are about equally effective.^{iv} This makes sense if we relate them to the learning cycle. Each one intersects the cycle of pain or dysfunction at one or more phases and thus leads to change in other phases. (See illustration on the next page.)

Let’s look at how the major approaches fit into the natural learning cycle. Traditional psychotherapy assumes change occurs primarily by intersecting the cycle at the affective and cognitive phases, emphasizing the unconscious affect. Catharsis unburdens the heart and mind, freeing it for the present. Examining old experience (such as repressed events) which created painful feelings and faulty mental constructs leads to insight. It is expected that one can change beliefs and behaviors, and obtain better consequences (such as less painful emotions and healthier relationships).

^{iv} Miller, et.al. 1995.

Roger's person-centered therapy operates with an assumption about the affective phase of the learning cycle. If one is sufficiently respected, loved and accepted by receiving unconditional positive regard one will mobilize energy and other latent resources such as inner wisdom. One can then change thinking and action, which will in turn result in better feelings and functioning.

Adlerian psychotherapy assumes that the person's positive life and growth forces (primarily affective) can be identified and mobilized in order to allow him or her to grow into healthier thinking and behaving. These lead to more positive outcomes such as competence, mastery, and enhanced self-esteem.

Existential psychotherapy intersects the cognitive phase of the cycle as the most productive of change. It assumes change occurs best when the person finds, creates or discovers meaning and purpose (cognitive constructs). These will lead to more meaningful behavior and other fulfilling consequences, such as richer relationships and more positive emotions.

Other cognitive approaches also advocate change by intersecting the cycle at the mental level. Discovering one's thought patterns, habits and operating principles or beliefs, especially automatic thoughts, allows us to intercept the negative. This permits us to replace the unhealthy with the healthy. We exchange painful emotions and nonconstructive behaviors which are the outcome of the thoughts with healthy thoughts.

The ABC's of the Natural Learning Cycle

Graphics not available yet.

Reframing is one method of gaining a new perspective on an old mental landscape. Reality therapy emphasizes consequences and reshaping behavior to produce desired outcomes.

Transactional analysis seeks to enlighten us (insight) about habitual (unconscious) behaviors and thoughts which create less than ideal relationships (such as when we respond in a judging, parental way or out of our childish self rather than our adult self). Thus we may choose to behave differently the next time we go 'round the cycle.' In Rational-Emotive Therapy the therapist works concurrently on both cognitive and affective.

Behavioral theories and approaches emphasize behavior as the first step. **Doing** something different does appear to be the **fastest** route to introducing other new elements into the learning cycle. Behavior change has immediate impact in consequences, such as feelings, relationships and other outcomes. These outcomes lead to more positive emotions.

Gestalt methods appear to offer the most wholistic approach, best attending body, mind, emotions, past and present. (Even though I don't embrace all of Perls' philosophy about the psyche, I believe his work has a great deal to offer us.) The Gestalt approach works with both cognitive and affective, and through its emphasis on responsibility, the behavioral. In addition, emphasis on the body as a trustworthy expression of past experience (body memory) and present affective states makes it unique. It best combines the past (historical, memory, body memory, emotions) and the present outcomes, such as physical health, non-verbal, bodily expressions of pain, etc. Gestalt stresses re-learning. Taking responsibility (I can choose, I can create better feelings, I can achieve better consequences.) is one pathway. Re-experiencing repressed feelings and recovering memories is another pathway leading to insight, and thus to healthier mental life and freer functioning.

A Christian Perspective

When we assess counseling in the light of our goal of growth into "the image of Christ" or "fullness of Christ," which the Scripture tells us is our ideal, the experiential learning cycle sheds light on the process. It illustrates why many educational and counseling approaches do in fact produce some change. It also shows us what is needed in order for change to best occur. The M & M Model for Change proposes that we need not only motivation for change, but also means and models. The Holy Spirit supplies all of these. He gives us both the will (motivation) and the power (means) to achieve His purpose (Phil. 2:13). He provides abundant models for us. We need not be stuck in the cycle, doomed to repeat our sinful and unhealthy ways of life and continue in our pain!

The Holy Spirit is involved in all phases of the experiential cycle. In our drawing, we can visualize Him at the center, influencing all aspects the cycle. His multiple roles within us perfectly meet our need for new resources at each step of change.

The roles which the Holy Spirit fulfills in our lives involve all aspects of our learning. He is the comforter (affective), the teacher and counselor (cognitive), the empowerer of action (behavioral). In a host of other ways He influences the body, mind, will, spirit, emotions. He attends to our innermost being, even praying for us in times when we cannot find expressions. He prompts, enlightens, empowers, exhorts, instructs, convicts, encourages, heals and even comforts us in our false guilt (I John 3:19). He enables us to overcome shame and to escape guilt. He brings to light the hidden, blind aspects of the self, so that we can be healed and become more integrated. (Psalm 139:23, 24). (Integration means acknowledging all aspects of self, rather than denying that some exist and operating inappropriately out of denial. For example, to embrace our potential for growth in Christ while recognizing our potential for sin

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and our need for grace represents a proper integration of our duality as “saved by grace,” as created in and restored to God’s image even though marred by sin [I John 1]).

What makes counseling “Christian” is whether it emanates from a Biblical worldview^v and is performed in partnership with the Holy Spirit. With this foundation we can draw upon diverse approaches in psychotherapy. We can identify their merit from a Biblical perspective, understanding that change at all phases of the cycle is advocated and illustrated in the Scriptures. The first commandment itself admonishes us to love God with heart, mind and soul (Matt. 22:38).

Cognitive change: “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” we are instructed (Rom. 12:2). The inference is that changing our thinking through God’s Word, gaining the “mind of Christ,” will result in transformed behavior. Yet we are also warned that “faith without action is as dead as a body without a soul” (James 2:26, PH), implying mental assent alone does not produce godly behavior. Our beliefs must be internalized, must become part of us (heart level attitudes), for what we internalize is what we act out.

Behavioral change: Jesus Himself advocated behavior change as a first step in growth. He says, “Come (behavior) to me” and tells us that if we believe we will have rivers of living water flowing out of our souls (John 7:38). He begins with behavior, which leads to belief and a changed affect. In many of His healings or encounters with the needy He begins with telling them to change a behavior. To the woman taken in adultery He says, “Go home and do not sin again” (John 8:11). To the paralytic by the pool He says, “Take up your mat and walk.” Because the man obeyed, he was not only healed but became a believer in Jesus as sent from God (John 5). To the blind man, He says, “Go and wash...” The man later recounted, “I went off and washed--and that’s how I got my sight!” (John 9:11 PH) To the hungry 5,000 He says, “Sit down...” and then he broke the bread and multiplied it. He tells us that if we are faithful in obedience, we will know the truth and the truth will set us free (John 8:31). John reminds us “obedience is the test of whether we really love God” (I John 2:3 PH). However, lest we think behavior alone was Jesus’ teaching, remember that He also says “the work of God is to believe” (John 6:29).

The epistles too put great emphasis on behavior, on obedience. Paul says the new life is expressed in heart, action and mind (Eph. 3:12, 3:15, 4:2). He repeats this triad of affective, behavioral and cognitive many times. He reminds us that in living out this new life (Change with a capital C!) we have “boundless resources” provided in Christ (Eph. 1:11).

The Scriptures also make it clear that behavior reveals our inner condition: “Out of the heart flow the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23). “Out of the heart (affective, inner) the mouth speaks” (behavior) (Matt. 12:34) Jesus says, “Don’t lay up treasure on earth...for where your treasure is (behavior) there will your heart (affect) be also” (Matt. 6:21).

Affective change: Throughout both Old and New Testaments we are instructed to change our feelings about God—to draw near with our **hearts**. The Proverbs are especially rich in admonitions of the heart. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart” (Prov. 3:5). “Take hold of the words (of God) with your hearts” (Prov. 4:4). “Guard your hearts” (Prov. 4:23). The prophets emphasized changing the heart too: “Wash the evil from your hearts” (Jer. 4:14). “Turn to me with your hearts, with fasting and weeping and mourning” (Joel 2:12). The Scriptures make it clear that a changed affect results in different behavior. For instance, “...after we ourselves have been comforted we will be able to comfort (behavior) others in their sufferings” (I Peter 5:10 PH).

As Christian counselors, we can assess an approach as helpful to the extent that it enable the client to intercept the experiential cycle and thus promote change. I find it helpful to work with a person in all three phases simultaneously, explaining that behavior change leads to immediately improved

^v Collins, Gary. 1995. *Biblical Basis of Christian Counseling*.

feelings and other outcomes, meanwhile working to change feelings and thinking, which takes longer.

We can rely on the Holy Spirit to provide resources to support change throughout the whole cycle. “God gives us everything we need for life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3 PH). Research confirms that the number one factor in counseling effectiveness is the person’s desire and motivation to change.^{vi} In this the Holy Spirit is the expert. He gives both the will and power for change. He transforms the mind, enabling the person to recognize faulty thinking and revealing the truth (in one’s history and one’s worth to God). In the second most powerful factor of effectiveness, relationship with the therapist, the Holy Spirit is also the master resource. He loves the person through the counselor who is His channel. Being loved is critical for the transformation of the person. God IS love, and His love is the healer. Is it any wonder that Carl Roger’s described “unconditional positive regard,” no doubt the **agape** of the New Testament as the essential resource?

The Holy Spirit provides abundant models through the Word--in persons, ideas, standards of behavior. These allow us to conceptualize new ways of living, new outcomes to make our desires into reality. He provides us the power or energy for re-structuring thinking and changing behavioral patterns so that we can break the bonds, even those passed on from generation to generation. He brings about the affective changes and the other desirable outcomes which we seek through His partnership within us.

My research on how the Holy Spirit shapes persons illustrates that He may do His healing work with or without a human counselor. Most of those whose lives I studied had both humble and traumatic beginnings. Only one of twelve had access to a counselor to help with their pain and old chains of behavior. Yet, through questing after God they became singularly healthy and fruitful. They were acutely responsive to God in letting go of old attitudes, thoughts, and actions--that is, they were quick to learn from Him and quick to use His resources. They experienced abundant life and revealed God’s nature of love and self-giving. Their transformations came about through partnering with God in their growth.

One participant in my study was a man I’ll call Hans. His life was marred by trauma from the beginning. His father, a Nazi officer, was “vicious and cruel.” Hans remembers his joy at age 5 when he heard his father was not going to return from the war, since he feared retaliation from the Russians. At four Hans and his mother and brother were evacuated to the countryside to escape the Allied bombings. By age 17 he had suffered many other severe difficulties. He became a communist, but was not impressed with communists, whom he found to be hypocritical. He went to a tent meeting. Hearing the liturgy, he was converted, realizing God would accept him in spite of his shame. He managed to escape to the west, for he knew he would be denied education as a Christian. He immediately sensed he wanted to serve God and began an intensive quest after God, eagerly applying what he found in the Scriptures, seeking fellowship with Christians, and living out the vows he made, even in childhood, to change the family patterns of violence and infidelity. From his painful and inauspicious beginnings he has risen to prominence in his profession. He travels worldwide, consulting even for governments, and serving as an unofficial pastor to missionaries around the globe. He never had a human “counselor” to help in the transformation, yet through the work of the Holy Spirit he has overcome his shame, found emotional healing, broken the old chains, and developed healthy relationships.

Suppose the child Chrissie grew up and became your client. Without the healing work of the Holy Spirit active in her, you would probably meet an adult still feeling unworthy and ashamed, guilty for her own existence, fearful, perfectionistic and perhaps seething with suppressed anger. You would work with her to re-process her experiences with her mother, help her to develop a new perspective on her

^{vi} Miller et.al, 1995.

mother's rage and screaming so that she might gain insight that her mother did love her and want her, but was immature and had her own problems which were the source of her rage. You might discover, with her, that her mother did not want her or love her, and help her accept that truth. You could teach her that Abba Father loves her and that his love never fails. You would work with her to express the old hurts and anger, lead her to confession of resentment and to forgiveness of her mother. You would help her develop healthier ways of feeling, thinking, relating and exemplify for her the resources she now has available in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the energizer for a new life. You would be a channel for the Holy Spirit's transformation. She would be a partner with Him as she consistently chooses to follow His promptings.

Our goal as Christian counselors is to speed or further the work of the Holy Spirit in others' lives. We are privileged to cooperate with Him, as His channels of love, wisdom, acceptance. Especially for sufferers who need a human presence in order to experience God's presence and love, we become channels of God's abundant resources, provided in Christ. We are also mentors, coaches, disciplers in the Christian life. We can share the joyful reality that God gives us "**everything** that we need for life and godliness" (II Peter 1:3 PH).