

Invitational Counseling: A Fresh Vernacular for Marriage and Family Therapy

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This article presents invitational counseling as an approach to use in marriage and family therapy. The language and basic tenets of invitational counseling are reviewed, and its compatibility with marriage and family therapy is illustrated with examples and case studies. The Five P's, (people, places, policies, programs, and processes) are suggested as a model for assessing marriages and relationships in the beginning of the counseling process. The article also proposes that invitational counseling be used as both a problem-solving and educational approach in working with couples and families.

Invitational counseling is a recently developed approach that offers a model for “professional helping within which counselors can incorporate compatible approaches for establishing helping relationships” (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996, p. 3). Its foundation is based on perceptual psychology, self-concept theory, and invitational education (Purkey & Novak, 1996). As a philosophy of professional practice, invitational counseling offers a fresh vernacular for appropriating related theories into various helping relationships.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that invitational counseling has value for marriage and family counseling. Invitational counseling is a personal approach to helping based on the idea of extending positive messages towards oneself and others. For this reason, “invitational counseling is as much a particular ‘stance’—a therapeutic attitude or disposition—as it is a methodology” (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996, p. 3). It is the language par-

ticular to this stance that offers marriage and family counselors a potentially fresh vernacular for working with couples, parents, and children.

As an initial presentation suggesting the compatibility of invitational counseling with marriage and family therapy, this article is limited in its scope and is, therefore, not a comprehensive review of the literature or research on this topic. Indeed, invitational counseling is a recently proposed model with relatively few research studies to establish its efficacy (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). In contrast, marriage and family therapy has numerous theories and models of practice available, many of which have been researched and presented in the literature for decades. This article is intended as a preliminary thought piece to encourage discussion and research efforts that might investigate the usefulness of invitational counseling in marriage and family therapy.

Marriage, family, and relationship counseling are, in a sense, much like gold mining. An experienced counselor realizes that the presenting concern is often the exposed part of deeper difficulties that must be carefully unearthed for consideration by the couple or family. In marriage counseling, for example, common perceptions of specific problems may lead couples into therapy, but their perceptions of the overall relationship must be examined if counseling is to be successful. There is a correlation between marital satisfaction and the perceptions that each marital partner holds about the marriage and the marriage partner. Some research suggests that long-term marriages survive and flourish because both parties in the relationship share common perceptions of satisfaction and meaning. For example, Lauer and Lauer (1990) gathered data from 100 couples who were married 45 years or more. They found the following variables were identified by the couples as important to their marriages: (1) being married to someone they liked as a person and enjoyed being with, (2) commitment to the spouse and to the marriage, (3) a sense of humor, and (4) consensus on various matters such as aims and goals in life, friends, and decision making. At the same time, it is important to consider the perception of the relationship that is held by each partner, because women and men may determine their perception of the marriage in a different fashion (Merves-Okin, Amidon, & Bernt, 1991).

Encouraging couples and family members to focus on their perceptions and to examine the perceptions of others seems appropriate in therapy because frequently miscommunications, misunderstandings, and inaccurate interpretations of events exacerbate the concerns and issues presented. Invitational counseling, as noted, is founded on perceptual psychology and self-concept theory, making it compatible with marriage and family theories that emphasize perceptions of individual marriage partners or family members and the effects of these perceptions on the family system.

A Fresh Vernacular

Invitational counseling believes the client's own perception of his or her situation as the key element for the counselor's consideration. At the same time, the essence of one's self-concept is one's perception of his or her personal existence, and the continual process through which a person's self-concept grows and expands throughout life.

Perception and self-concept are interactive factors that play an essential role in marriage and family therapy. The difficulties that couples have, or that families experience, are often as much a function of how they view themselves and others within the family or the relationship as they are of actual events.

In addition to the vernacular of perceptual psychology and self-concept theory, invitational theory delineates four levels of functioning that include helpful and harmful behaviors. The most harmful level of functioning (Level I) is to be *intentionally disinviting*. It includes anything that demeans, defeats, or destroys another person. For example, a spouse who always ridicules in public and finds some insidious satisfaction from putting his or her partner down is an illustration of this destructive level. At a higher level, *unintentionally disinviting* persons (Level II) might mean well, but they are unaware of their "disinvitational" stance. As an illustration, when parents behave this way, they do things that thwart children's development without meaning to. A mother, who continues to feed a young child capable of feeding himself or herself, unintentionally extends dependency and hinders responsible development.

At the third level, *unintentionally inviting* persons usually mean well and are somewhat effective in what they do, but they lack clear purpose and direction. This uncertainty prevents them from gaining self-knowledge and repeating successful events in their relationships.

The highest level of functioning, to be *intentionally inviting* (Level IV) towards oneself and others, allows for clear purpose and direction in all relationships. The spouse, who consciously and consistently does positive things and behaves in ways that elevate the self-worth of his or her partner, is functioning at the highest level.

While the four levels of invitational counseling appear similar to earlier empathy scales created by counseling theorists (e.g., Carkhuff, 1969), the concept of counselor and client intentionality adds a dimension that permits the exploration of purposeful versus careless behaviors. In this way, the levels can be used in marriage and family counseling to ask partners and parents to explore and evaluate their behaviors not only in terms of “inviting” and “disinviting” qualities but also in respect to their degree of intention.

Among all the aspects of invitational counseling, the language created by the Five Factors may have the most importance in marriage, family, and relationship counseling. The Five Factors, commonly called the Five P’s, include people, places, policies, programs, and processes.

The Five P’s offers a way to help couples assess and understand the present state of their relationships. For example, in marriage counseling couples might evaluate and compare the Five Factors of their relationship as a way to appreciate each other’s perceptions. This appreciation may encourage them, with a counselor’s assistance, to work on a more inviting posture in dealing with concerns about their relationship. As the couple learns to be more inviting towards each one another, they are able to address more serious difficulties.

Invitational Theory and Marriage and Family Therapy

Invitational counseling offers a comprehensive assessment tool through the use of the Five P's: people, places, policies, programs, and processes (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). Used mainly for assessing individual perceptions within large settings, the Five P's are applicable in marriage and family therapy because the factors that affect relationships among individuals are the same ones that influence marriage and family relationships.

How people perceive themselves and others directly affects the atmosphere within a family setting. Additionally, how other people function—friends, teachers, bosses, fellow workers, administrators, and so forth—affects each person who, in turn, takes this dynamic “home” and consequently affects the overall family. As an illustration, the husband who is upset at his boss for unreasonable work demands meets his daughter's concern for pleasing her baseball coach, as well as his wife's worry over her sick father, and the interaction of all these matters has an impact on the family. All of these “people” issues influence the overall dynamic of the family system.

Places focus on physical environments where people live, work, go to school, shop, and worship. All these factors have an effect that is played out, among other places, in the family system. Concern about physical security at a child's school, for instance, heightens parental concerns about safety in general. Such anxiety affects the family system in both known and unknown ways. Similarly, the atmosphere of a couple's home in terms of comfort, security, order, and other aspects contributes to, or detracts from, the health of the overall relationship.

Policies are “regulations, codes, orders, mandates, rules and edicts created by those in authority” (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996, p. 100). An understanding of marriage and family policies offers insight into the function and dysfunction of relationships and family systems. A husband's policy of “wanting dinner on the table the minute he comes home from work” might inhibit a wife who has decided to return to work instead of staying

home. The manner in which individual policies are discerned and the power implicit in those policies are important dynamics within the marriage or family system.

Programs are developed as a method of delivering services and information to groups and organizations. An assessment of how external programs affect the family's inner functioning and the family's response to those situations is key to understanding and intervening in the system. For example, an after-school program in which the child wants to participate influences the family because of budget-stretching costs and structural changes that parents make in rearranging their schedules to pick up the child. Similarly, the wife's decision to attend community college to upgrade her work skills may provide the positive benefit of a larger salary, but also affects the family in terms of the mother's presence and quality time.

Processes refer to the routines, rituals, procedures, and practices that affect individuals and their quality of life. The marriage and family counselor has responsibility to assess and understand the countless processes at work within a given relationship or family system. To illustrate, the parents of a young boy were in conflict about ways to have the child take responsibility for getting himself ready for school in the morning. This daily event had become a major battle. The couple framed the problem as a disagreement about who had responsibility to ensure the boy was up and ready for the school bus. Notwithstanding this problem, the couple did not have a way to state their concerns openly and make logical decisions. When the counselor inquired, "What process do you use to resolve this conflict when it happens?" the parents sat silently with no response. At this point, the immediate task was to create a procedure for mutual decision making to avoid further conflict in this area.

As an assessment tool, the Five P's offers two important components for the counseling process. First, it presents the gift of time. The assessment takes time to put into words one's thoughts about people, places, policies, programs, and processes. In talking about these areas, clients share the perceptions they hold about these five areas of life. The counselor sets the overall parameters of the assessment process by inquiring

about the Five P's, but clients create the agenda as each area is shared. The counselor who cares enough to listen to a client's agenda creates the most valuable quality of counseling: empathy.

When counselors talk with clients about the Five P's, they discuss factors that are common in clients' daily lives and experiences. Rather than immediately delving into threatening areas, counselors begin the helping process from the clients' own view. Such a stance by the counselor is itself inviting, and embodies the heart of invitational counseling even in the initial stages of assessment. In their research of marital therapy dropouts, Allgood and Crane (1991) learned that the admission of marital problems to strangers increases anxiety that often leads to premature termination of counseling relationships. Thus, counselors must give a certain amount of time and attention to the creation of a relationship as they begin the process of therapy.

The second important quality that the Five P's offers to the assessment process is the chance for clients to tell their own story. As a non-obtrusive means of assessment, the Five P's enable the marriage and family counselor to encourage clients to discuss each area in the context of their life together. The counselor's opportunity to listen to the Five P's, as well as the client's perception of his or her situation, allows time to consider a range of interventions that may be helpful.

Combining the Five P's of the marriage or family system offers counselors a comprehensive assessment of each partner or family member, which, in turn, suggests appropriate ways for addressing concerns or solving problems. Counselors view the interplay of the Five P's as each unveils key perceptual issues for marriage partners and family members. The result is a comprehensive picture of the couple's relationship or the family system, including factors inside and outside the relationship as well as each member's perceptions of these factors. In troubled relationships, the difficulties of one member affects the entire system and everyone needs to be directly or indirectly involved in the search for a solution.

Integration of Invitational Theory

As noted, one distinctive contribution of invitational counseling to marriage, family, and relationship counseling is the assessment opportunity it offers in the form of the Five P's. Invitational counseling also offers an instructional possibility that can be integrated with other marriage and family interventions. The following cases illustrate the use of the Five P's as an assessment method and how the five levels of functioning can be taught to couples and families. The first case demonstrates the use of the Five P's with a couple, and the second shows how the levels of functioning can be used to instruct clients about inviting and disinviting behaviors.

Ralph and Jane

Ralph and his wife, Jane, had been married for four years; they had no children. Committed to their careers, Ralph was a manager at an investment firm and Jane served as a paralegal for a local attorney. The couple came for counseling because, as they described it, "We argue over little things and we don't feel good about one another any more." Without a definite complaint or problem identified, the initial sessions consisted of confusing words, feelings, and attitudes with no real sense of direction.

Beginning with the third session, the counselor asked the couple to frame their concerns using the Five P's. Ralph and Jane were in agreement about the "people" in their lives and the roles played by these individuals that included work acquaintances, friends, fellow church members, and families. While the "places" of their lives differed due to work and friendships, this area also proved to be a point of agreement and strength. Ralph and Jane were aware of the various "policies" that work-places and family brought to their marriage, but they found these to be powerful structures that brought support to their lives. As for "programs," Ralph and Jane had divided their lives and their calendars into personal and professional areas, and both felt good about the balance in their lives across programs of work, church, and family.

At this point, two important things occurred. First, Ralph, Jane, and the therapist had a focus for the counseling relationship. Rather than continuing the unfocused discussions that began the sessions, they now had clearer direction. Second, Ralph and Jane began to realize that they agreed about many aspects of their marriage, which was strong in ways they had been unaware. There was a true and positive energy about the areas they felt they had mastered in terms of “people,” “places,” “policies,” and “programs.” This vigor helped remove some of the anxiety about their marriage and framed the counseling process in a more positive light.

When the discussion moved to the “processes” of their relationship, Ralph and Jane saw that this was an area of difficulty for them, and it affected other areas of their marriage. When they were angry or had a disagreement on an issue, Ralph and Jane would argue, withdraw from one another, stop speaking, and then in a few days act as if nothing had ever happened. When the next problem occurred, the past unresolved issues were highlighted to the extent that a feeling of general frustration about their marriage resulted. The counselor asked them for an example of an unresolved problem and its effect, and they mentioned a disagreement about going to Jane’s family every Sunday to have lunch. When the counselor inquired what process the couple used to resolve their conflict, they replied in unison, “We don’t have any process!” This was the moment in which the real issue of their marital struggle came to light. It informed the present discussion and framed future counseling sessions. Ralph and Jane needed to create a process for sharing their concerns and making mutual decisions in their marriage.

With the Five P’s providing structure, Ralph and Jane were able to examine aspects of their self-beliefs and perceptions about the status of their marriage and their place as individuals within that relationship. Some of these perceptions were confirmed by each, which offered strength and hope for their marriage. Where perceptions differed, Ralph and Jane realized that those differences offered opportunity for further investigation. Consequently, invitational counseling allowed Ralph and Jane to isolate their concerns in a guided fashion and encouraged them to understand each other’s perceptions for future problem solving.

Marv, Mary, and Meg

A second, but no less important contribution of invitational counseling, is the teaching of invitational concepts to couples and families. While people are often aware of specific conflict that leads them into counseling, they are frequently unaware of the status of their broader relationships. Helping clients become mindful of basic relational issues by considering the spectrum from “intentionally disinviting” to “intentionally inviting” behavior is an educational process. As such, invitational counseling is an educational approach as well as a therapeutic one. The ability to educate couples and family members and help them assess the status of their relationship is as significant as focusing on the concerns that initially cause them to seek counseling.

Because invitational counseling is a relatively new approach to therapeutic relationships, research is lacking to demonstrate its efficacy. However, some research indicates that children can learn the basic tenets of inviting and disinviting behaviors and, when taught the basic concepts, children’s perceptions about using positive behaviors towards others may become more favorable (Schmidt & Shields, 1998).

An example of this educational process is seen with the family who came for counseling about their intense anger whenever they disagreed. Marv, the father, admitted that he flew into a rage when anyone disagreed with him. Mary, the mother was aware that she used her own anger to protect her fourteen-year-old daughter, Meg, from her husband’s rage. Mary and Meg effectively formed a powerful alliance against Marv.

By teaching this family the Levels of Functioning (from Level I intentionally disinviting to Level IV intentionally inviting), the counselor helped them move from the immediate focus on anger to positive ways of communicating their feelings. Once the family became aware of communication patterns and chose more effective styles, each member was able to discuss the power dynamics of their relationship more openly. By removing the threat of being “blown away by Dad,” as Meg put it, intentional

invitations laid the groundwork for deeper dialogue about other issues within the family.

Conclusion

Invitational counseling is an approach founded on self-concept theory and perceptual psychology that may have value for marriage and family therapy. It could be especially useful as an assessment model to help couples and family members evaluate various factors about their relationship, and as an educational intervention by which people learn positive strategies to address areas of concern.

As invitational counseling is used with marriage, family, and relationship counseling, there are areas for further consideration and development. For one, a reconfiguration of the Five P's to express a family viewpoint might be helpful. More explicit creation and definition of a "Family Five P's" could be facilitative in family counseling. As a part of such study, an expanded consideration of programs might be warranted. Purkey and Schmidt (1996) considered programs as things designed by organizations to define and describe their service delivery systems. Yet, families also create and sustain their own programs, which need to be considered in therapeutic relationships. The current definition of programs within invitational counseling does not adequately address the family programs that arise within family systems. A delineation and description of family programs could make invitational counseling more useful for marriage, family, and relationship counseling.

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