**Symbolic- Experiential Couples & Family Counseling**

**Symbolic-experiential couples and family counseling**, sometimes known as experiential family therapy or the experiential-symbolic approach, has a strong relationship to other existential, humanistic, and phenomenological orientations. The experiential approach stresses choice, freedom, self-determination, growth, and actualization. It is an interactive process involving a family with a counselor who is willing to be real. The focus is on **here-and-now** interaction between the family and the counselor, rather than on exploring past experiences.

Carl Whitaker, who died in April 1995, was the best known exponent of this freewheeling, intuitive approach. For much of his career, he preferred to work with a co-counselor, and many of his associates from Thomas Malone and Gus Napier to David Keith became scholar-practitioners in this experiential model. In 1988, Whitaker published a book based on an earlier video that featured an intensive three-day symbolic-experiential family session with “a farm family”; his co-counselor was William Bumberry (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1986, 1988). These sessions are excerpted below.

John and Marie, the parents, came to the sessions with their five adult children: Vanessa, age 30; Gail, age 28; Doris, age 27; Mike, age 23, and Marla, age 18. Mike and Gail were delayed in arriving and were able to be present only for the last day. It was Vanessa who had asked for the family consultation. She was “studying to become a counselor” (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, p. 5), and she wanted to address some of the struggles in her family that kept her tied up.

**Whitaker:** How did you decide to come? What would you like to get out of it? How can I help? (pause) Let me tell you how I deal. I’d like to hear about you to get a sense of the pain you are going through. So I can feel my way into the family. But I need to be clear with you, that I’m sort of the coach on this baseball team, I’m not playing on it. You have to make the final decision about what you do with your living. (pause) I should warn you that I get mean. (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, p. 7).

This opening is different from what most practitioners are taught in graduate training programs. What do you think of this beginning? What if everything you ever were taught about counseling was effective, but not much fun? Would it be okay with you to introduce fun, the unusual, even the outrageous into the session? Would you do it from the very beginning or wait until you had established a rapport? What role do you think a family counselor should play? Do you like Whitaker’s idea of being a coach on a team? How would a coach act? Would it be different from what you think a professional counselor would normally be?

Family practitioners often start family sessions with some form of assessment that keeps the practitioner personally aloof and distant. Whitaker favored a more assertive, proactive introduction in which he claimed the I-position he was interested in taking in counseling. His boldness was always authentic, emanating from a desire to create a real interaction between the family and himself. By initiating his own stance, the family was free to react in whatever way seemed useful to them and he, in turn, would respond to their responses: An interactive, experiential dance was immediately underway. In this dance, the counselor may still lead, but she or he also pays attention to the efforts of the dance partners, adjusting the rhythm to movements offered by others.

In the early part of the first session, Whitaker asked about the father’s family-of-origin. This was a topic initiated by the father that Whitaker followed, but he constantly looked for ways in which the historical data informed the current situation and relationships in the family. The first question was related to the father’s dad.

**Whitaker:** Is he dead, too?

**Dad:** Yes.

**Whitaker:** When did he die?

**Dad:** In 1972.

**Whitaker:** What was wrong?

**Dad:** He was 89 years old. Infirmity and old age. He lived a pretty good life.

**Whitaker:** And Mom? . . . Was Dad a farmer too?

**Dad:** Yes.

**Whitaker:** What did Mother die of?

**Dad:** She died at 62 of pneumonia. We could have avoided it if we had realized it.

**Whitaker:** And what about Dad? Did he remarry?

**Dad:** No.

**Whitaker:** How many brothers and sisters?

**Dad:** None.

**Whitaker:** You’re the only child? No wonder you’re spoiled, huh? That’s it! That’s the real problem, huh?

**Mom:** Yes. If he had been brought up . . . he would have had a sister.

**Doris:** Really! A sister wouldn’t have been that different in age.

**Mom:** Molly was walking in the milk house one day and slipped. She lost the baby at 8 months.

**Whitaker:** Older or younger?

**Mom:** She would have been younger. It would have been good, because she would have told him, “Get out of here! Don’t do that!” Brothers and sisters will tell each other. Friends are afraid.

**Whitaker:** Is that true of wives, too, or are you being a good sister to him?

**Mom:** Maybe I am. Maybe I’m too good to him.

**Whitaker:** Why don’t you get over that?

**Mom:** I don’t know. It’s hard for me.

**Whitaker:** Just a sucker are you? . . . Just naturally?

**Mom:** What? What did you say?

**Whitaker:** Are you just a natural-born sucker?

**Mom:** Maybe I am! Oh, I get mad at him a lot of times, but he just walks away. He won’t fight! He walks to the back 40 (acres) and I can’t find him. I get mad because he won’t fight it out. He just walks away!

**Whitaker:** Why don’t you get a bow and arrow or something?

**Doris:** Take the tractor.

**Whitaker:** Or a shotgun full of rock salt? They used to talk about that when I was a kid. (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, pp. 15–19)

In this segment, Whitaker used his intuition to frame interactive positions for the two parents: Dad’s “spoiled child” position was counterbalanced with Mom’s “natural-born sucker” position. Whitaker’s insinuation was that this man, who almost had a sister in real life, managed to marry one: She was a woman, the father knew, who would continue to sacrifice parts of herself (be a sucker) to care for him and keep him spoiled. This interactive mutuality flies in the face of the more linear conceptualization of father “as the problem,” an unfeeling man who has failed to support the other members of the family. Because Mom has been willing to dedicate herself to a life of service, it has also served her children to support their relationship tacitly. They have gotten service too, but more important, none of them really wants to take care of Dad if Mom “resigns.”

The unusual suggestion of using a bow and arrow or a shotgun on Dad suggested that Mom might start to consider the possibility of stepping out of a victim role and do something about her life in relation to this man. This is an example of parallel play (Keith, 2015), in which the counselor “has a separate self [with] its own experience, and there is no intentional effort or obligation to be congruent with the Other. In fact, it is important to be slightly incongruent. The noncongruence produces interpersonal energy” (p. 139). By suggesting an aggressive idea far beyond anything the mother would consider herself, she was free to entertain her less-threatening, but still suppressed, desires to be angry with— or even rage at—Dad. Whitaker’s more-outrageous suggestions are examples of what he calls **seeding the unconscious** (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1986). Because he owned his own projections (his own spoken, over-the-top ideas, feelings, concepts, or metaphors), the family members did not have to feel blamed or guilty for having their own reactions and feelings.

In this first session with the family, Whitaker also explored Dad’s escape into work, suggesting at one point that he loved his cows more than he did his family, an idea that the mother did not experience as crazy. At the same time, Whitaker also indicated that the mother started loving the kids more than the father. Naming these two movements as “affairs” once again established the mutuality of their distancing from each other. In following the mother’s comments about her husband’s “workaholic” ways, Whitaker also uncovered her concern about the father’s attraction to other women and his interest in and ability to dance with other women.

Toward the end of the first session, Dad talked about feeling burnt out on farming and all that it demands of him. Whitaker sensed that this was the same as being burnt out on life, and he directly asked about the father feeling suicidal, a possibility that Mom indicated her husband hints at.

**Whitaker:** How much longer do you think you’re going to live?

**Dad:** Well, that’s a good question. As far as I’m concerned, I’m ready any day.

**Whitaker:** Oh really?

**Dad:** Sure.

**Whitaker:** Why?

**Dad:** I lived a good life. I did everything I ever wanted to do. If I lived again, I’d do it the same. . . . I have no regrets. It was hard work, but one thing with it, you always had the satisfaction of seeing your accomplishments. While with a lot of things, a good factory job, for instance, you get good money, but you have nothing to show for it. But on the farm, if you’re lucky and have a good crop, you can take care of your food and clothes. You have no debt and no credit.

**Whitaker:** I just had a funny feeling. Is he a softy? I thought he was going to cry.

**Mom:** He never cries at funerals, or anything. Even his Dad’s funeral. I was sobbing away.

**Doris:** He did at the end.

**Mom:** Yes, I saw him at the end. A teeny bit.

**Doris:** Well, we all have our levels.

**Whitaker:** I thought he was going to cry just now. Did you feel like crying a minute ago?

**Dad:** Well, I feel . . . sometimes I get that way. You know, but . . . . Well, like with my Dad. If you had seen what he went through. I was glad he could go. (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, pp. 29–31)

In the closing moments of the first session, the father’s humanness began to show, and even though the family engaged in a discussion of Dad’s feelings at an earlier time, Whitaker stayed with the present and with the process he observed right in the session. Dad’s humanness was emerging now. It was not a special, unique, past event.

At the beginning of the next session, it slipped out that Mom consulted with Marla about what to bring on the trip to counseling. Then she forgot to pack night clothes for either her husband or herself, a fact that led Whitaker to suggest the old folks were really in trouble now. Whitaker’s presence almost seemed to intensify in this next session. He constantly probed the session’s content for areas in which covert sexuality could have been made manifest; his interventions almost always exaggerated implied possibilities in the family, raising their anxiety enough to motivate more honest and direct interactions.

It became clearer as the session progressed that both Vanessa and Marla had difficulties in establishing and maintaining close relationships with significant men in their lives. Their approach-avoidance postures with men seemed to reflect the pain and distance that existed in their parents’ relationship. As a more-open conversation related to the adult daughters’ pain in relation to men emerged, both parents seemed to distance themselves with references to the past, outside distractions, or silence. At one point, Whitaker joined Dad in yet another discussion of tractors only to trigger raging anger in Vanessa: She was leading the way for the family to break the silence and address each other with emotional honesty.

In this family, multiple triangles began to show themselves, as well as many nonproductive role-reversals. Vanessa could not seem to decide whether she wanted a boyfriend or a guru in her life, and she tended to get them mixed up: The man on whom she would most like to lean, her father, seemed all but unavailable to her. Marla stood up to her father’s demands, unlike her mother, but neither of them ever felt as though they had won with him. Mike was the only person left to whom the mother felt she could turn. “He’s the only one who understands me! He understands the whole situation. He sees it all as clear as a bell. As clear as a picture!” (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, p. 143). At different points in the session, Whitaker accused Mike of being mother’s “other man” or even a parent to his own mother. Whitaker wondered out loud if Mike might also be Marla’s grandparent. Making the different transactions and adopted roles manifest was Whitaker’s way of putting everything on the table and letting the family sort out what was needed, what was useful, and what was useless.

Toward the end of the session, the openness that had occurred between family members led Dad to wonder about the four miscarriages his wife had had, occurrences he associated with the spraying of herbicides. He talked about the guilt he had felt for years.

**Whitaker:** Why don’t you tell people things? Just stupid?

**Dad:** Could be. Sometimes I don’t think about it until it’s too late.

**Whitaker:** I don’t mean the facts. I mean you telling about your suffering. They tell you. Why shouldn’t you tell them? (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, pp. 168–169)

As the third day begins, the counseling group was transformed by the addition of Mike and Gail to the session. Whitaker also sensed that he was running out of time, and his challenges to family members were more direct as he sought to release them from their defensive postures and let them live as real people with each other. Both Mike and Gail demonstrated the same reluctance to emerge that the other family members had in the first session. Although Mike was asked to reveal something of his own craziness in the family, it was Gail, Whitaker recognized, who had been “scapegoated” as the unhealthy or weak one in the family.

**Whitaker:** If you stayed in diapers I think Mom would be great. She wouldn’t have to notice that she was getting older. But if you ever try to be a person, instead of a baby for her . . .

**Gail:** I’m trying! I think it’s an identity that has to come over the years.

**Whitaker:** That’s one of the things that bothers me. Don’t say you’re trying! Trying doesn’t help! It only helps if you make it. It’s like saying you’re trying to make money. It only matters if you make it. You have to be as mean as hell to make it. Have you ever learned to be mean?

**Gail:** Oh, that’s another good one! I’m basically too good to be mean!

**Whitaker:** That’s what I’m worried about. That’s how Mother is. She’s too good to even get in heaven. I don’t think they could stand her. God would be embarrassed.

**Gail:** She is a good woman . . . . She is a person.

**Whitaker:** I didn’t see any evidence of it! All I saw was her pain and suffering and emptiness. I don’t even believe her story about the old man. I think she did it to him. She made him push her around, so she could be a nobody and blame him for it. It sounds like you’re doing the same thing.

**Gail:** No. I’m not exactly like her.

**Whitaker:** . . . Do you ever get mean inside? You know, like you’d like to kill the whole gang? . . . You’ve got to learn to be murderous! You’ve got to be able to feel like killing people inside of yourself in order to get to be a person. Otherwise, you will end up being a sucker. Mother has never had the courage to even want to kill anybody, unless it was me.1 (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, pp. 179–182)

Just as Whitaker had seeded the unconscious with sexual innuendo and parallel play, he now gave aggressive desires a full and open place within the family system. The expression of internal aggression was heightened further when Whitaker brought out a set of four batacas (soft bats that can be used to attack one another symbolically without causing any real hurt or harm). He handed one bat to Gail, one to Marla, and one each to Mom and Dad. “We’ll give the old man this one. It’s kind of broken, like old men’s things are apt to be” (p. 185). Whitaker urged each of them to bat each other in the head, but they are reluctant to do so. Both Mom and Marla test them out on themselves. With some encouragement, Dad lightly hits Mom, and she retaliates. Harder and harder, she pounds away while Dad lowers his bataca and endures. The adult children are cheering her on. She is no longer slumped over in pain and constriction: no longer defeated. She is alive and forceful, almost transformed. Whitaker said, “He’s no puppy dog. You’ve got to do better than that!” (p. 187).

After a while, Mom stopped and invited Dad to have a turn, which he declines. He removed his glasses, a symbolic gesture that Whitaker noted immediately. Eventually, Dad asked if there were a game associated with the batacas. Whitaker answered that it was a game played just the way that the two of them did it. The winner was the one who beat the hardest, and the loser was the one who gave up first. Doris and Mom encouraged Gail to try it. She was reluctant. But Vanessa volunteered to do it with her, and the two women faced off with Vanessa hitting normally while Gail barely touched her with the bataca.

**Vanessa:** Gail is just tapping me.

**Gail:** Don’t hit too hard.

**Vanessa:** You’re not fragile.

**Gail:** [with the other family members cheering them on] Do you have to sit there cheering? (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, p. 190)

Toward the end of the session, Whitaker challenged Gail’s position as the family martyr and as the **scapegoat**. Although scapegoats often result in families in which parents suffer and cannot make good contact with each other, Whitaker noted that letting go of the “scapegoated” position is hard to do. “It’s not easy to change presidents once they’re in office” (p. 192).

Three years later, Vanessa called for a follow-up appointment. They were having a family reunion, and they all wanted Whitaker updated on their lives. Gail asked for two sessions: one day for another counseling session, and one day for some sense of catching up and closure. During the first session, Mom’s loneliness (to the point of suicidal thoughts) emerged, along with her continuing reluctance to burden her children with it. It was in the interaction between Mom and her children that real change was noted in the family dynamics. The adult children were able to weep with their mother and insist that she keep the communication channels open with them. By way of summary, over the last three years Gail’s use of medications had been reduced, and she was living independently. Mike had taken over the family farm, and Vanessa was invested in an intimate relationship about which she felt very good. Dad had initiated more closeness with Mom, finally having built a new home for her, small and cozy, and spent time together at night.

Whitaker’s aim was always to unmask pretense and create new meaning while liberating family members to be themselves. As in the other existential approaches, techniques are secondary to the relationship that the counselor is able to establish with the family. Whitaker did not propose a set of methods; rather, it is the personal involvement of the counselor with a family that makes a difference. When techniques are employed, they arise from the counselor’s intuitive and spontaneous reactions to the present situation and are designed to increase clients’ awareness of their inner potential and to open up channels of family interaction.

**Key Concepts**

Subjective Focus. Symbolic experiential family counselors focus on the subjective needs of the individual in the family as they attempt to facilitate family interaction that will result in the individuality of each member (Hanna, 2018). They operate on the assumption that all family members have the right to be themselves but that the needs of the family may suppress this individuation and self-expression. In this sense, there is no right or wrong—or even preferred—way for a family to be: The goal is family-member authenticity.

An Almost Atheoretical Stance. Whitaker’s approach to family counseling was pragmatic and atheoretical, to the point of being anti-theoretical. He believed that theory can be a hindrance to clinical practice (Whitaker, 1976). He maintained that clinicians may use their theory to create distance in the name of being objective or that unseasoned practitioners may use theory as a way of controlling their anxiety about dealing with a family (Guerin & Chabot, 1992). This does not mean that he was without beliefs or values: He simply hadn’t projected these beliefs and values into an organized presentation on the nature of human beings and the systems in which they live. Still, his highly intuitive form of counseling was aimed at intensifying present experiencing. Indeed, his personal style was unconventional and provocative, and he valued his capacity for “craziness,” which was the ability to reach into his own, almost child-like unconscious to understand what was going on in the family. Through his own spontaneous reactions, he was able to tap material that a family kept secret. Although the family members may view secret material as crazy, it is the process of keeping secrets that actually drives family members crazy.

Being Is Becoming. Whitaker, like Paul Tillich (1959/2000), believed that being is becoming. The way in which people avoid growth and becoming is by doing and escaping either into the past or the future: They engage in what Whitaker (1989) called “metaliving” (p. 52). To really live is to be present, to narrow all of one’s energies into serving the present moment and the people and challenges in that moment. It is in the present that one can learn to listen to oneself and to experience and start to actualize one’s potential. Whitaker advocated the development of a child-like capacity for play as an antidote to metaliving. Being a child-like adult, using role-reversals, and discovering the humanness in one another: All of these support both fully living and becoming. Whitaker (1989) noted: “The child who discovers maleness in his mother and femaleness in his father has made a profoundly valuable discovery about [self]” (p. 57).

Intimacy: The Desired Outcome. Whitaker suggested that what we all want is intimacy. We start life intimately. We are in the wombs of our mothers and, while we are there, the mother is also remembering the intimacy of having “been one” with her mother. Birth starts the first and foremost dialectic in our lives, the struggle between I-ness and we-ness. The baby is propelled into separation, but immediately seeks the comfort and safety of the mother’s breast, the familiar heartbeat, the nurturance of being held and cuddled. As the child gets older, she or he ventures out from the mother and significant others, only to return: There is then another dialectic between individuation and belonging. Because all of this becomes distorted as we grow, Whitaker (1989) identified three kinds of intimacy: the delusion of intimacy, the illusion of intimacy, and the fact of intimacy.

The delusion of intimacy often is experienced when one falls in love with another. The other is invested with desired attributes and capacities far beyond what any given person could possibly have. “It’s a kind of psychological hallucination that frequently precipitates a two-person psychosis” (p. 59). In spite of a lack of evidence to support this kind of intimacy, it is unshakable and admits no contradiction from self or others. The illusion of intimacy is the desire for oneness. It bypasses the dialectic of individuation and belonging by creating an illusory third position: I and we are the same and there is no need to deal with the individual and the couple as separate realities. This experience misrepresents the fact of intimacy, but it is also what Whitaker calls “an excellent example of the symbolic experience” (p. 60). It is an illusion that cannot stand up to scrutiny but, in its symbolic nature, it nonetheless leads to a change in the individual’s way of living and interpersonal relationships.

The fact of intimacy requires individuals to break through the illusion of intimacy and to wrestle fully with the dialectic of individuation and belonging. It first requires that we develop a real intimacy with ourselves: That is, we must embrace what Whitaker called “the intimacy of isolation” (p. 61) and find a way really to listen to ourselves outside of the social structures in which we live. In real intimacy, there is a sense of cross-identification.

The exposure of one individual to the physical, visual presence of the other automatically sets up a sense of difference: “He’s taller, he’s fatter, he’s older, he’s smarter.” But it also activates in a much more powerful way the identification that “he’s human like me, he’s suffered, he feels badly, or he feels happy, as I do.” (p. 63)

The Dialectics of a Healthy Family. I have already mentioned that the first family dialectic is between individuation and **belonging**. Simply stated, the freer people are to individuate, the freer they are to connect and find a real sense of belonging without resorting to what Minuchin, Rosman, and Baker (1978) call **enmeshment**. Within families, there is also the dialectic between the roles we assume and our personhood. Roles are part of our jobs, our relationships with families and friends, and the duties and places we hold in the larger social groups to which we belong. In spite of all these roles, each of us is also an integrated whole—a complete person with feelings, values, hopes, and desires. Parallel dialectics, therefore, exist in all individuals: dialectics that seek a balance between intuition and cognition, impulse and control, love and hate, public and personal relations, craziness and trickiness, and stability and change. Again, letting one aspect of the mind augment the other is preferable to addressing any two capacities as opposing forces.

For example, most of us accept a certain amount of outside control in our lives, whether it comes from the family or the larger communities in which we live. Taken to an extreme, we enter into a deadened pattern of living, presenting only a public self, playing expected roles, and doing what is expected, rather than fully living. Impulse is our demand for freedom and space: the right to be our own person and follow our own path. Whitaker believed that these dialectics are never resolved, only balanced in a kind of dialectic dance. In this sense, the balance between love and hate is always in play. One cannot love someone fully unless one is willing to also hate—and to be hurt. The healthy family does not attempt to resolve these dialectics in a rigid adherence to given roles, a set of rules, or resorts to trickiness when individuals and systems no longer can control the demands and challenges of life. Growth comes from each individual’s increased freedom to express her or his oppositeness within the family system.

**Counseling Goals**

In Whitaker’s view, the goal of family counseling is to promote the feeling dimension: spontaneity, creativity, the ability to play, and the willingness to be “crazy.” Keith (2000) writes: “We seek to increase the creativity (what we call craziness or right-brained living) of the family and of the individual members” (p. 113). The central goal is to facilitate individual autonomy *and* a sense of belonging in the family. Experiential family counselors operate on the assumption that if individual family members increase their awareness and capacity for experiencing, more-genuine intimacy will result within the family circle. According to Keith and Whitaker, it is experience, not education, that changes families. Keith assumes that most of human experience occurs on the unconscious level, which can best be reached symbolically. For him, “symbolic” refers to finding multiple meanings for the same process.

A central tenet of Whitaker’s approach is that counselors need to be aware of their own responses to families in order to be therapeutic. The counselor functions best as an instigator of family openness, realness, and spontaneity. Experiential counselors place value on their own responses as a measure of healthy interaction. Furthermore, their personal experience determines their work in family counseling. Whitaker sees experiential counseling as a way for counselors to be actively engaged in their own personal development. Thus, counseling is a process that helps the counselor as much as the family.2

**The Counselor’s Role and Function**

The therapist’s default position is as a separate self instead of a mirror. The separate self has its own experience, and there is no intentional effort or obligation to be congruent with the Other. In fact, it is important to be slightly incongruent. The noncongruence produces interpersonal energy. (Keith, 2015,   
 p. 139)

Experiential counselors tend to create family turmoil and then coach the members through the experience. They are primarily interested in the interaction between themselves and the family. The counselor’s role requires immediacy, a willingness to be oneself, vitality, a degree of transparency, and willingness to use personal reactions during the family sessions. Although experiential counselors are willing to act as temporary experts and issue directives to the family, they are just as likely to maintain long periods of silence to augment the family members’ anxiety. Whitaker liked to think of himself as a coach or a surrogate grandparent. His enactment of these roles required structure, discipline, creativity, and presence (Keith, 2000, 2015). The relationship between the active and vital counselor and the family is the catalyst for growth and movement.

Therapeutic interventions are aimed at intensifying what is going on in the “here and now” of the family session. The focus of counseling is on the process of what is unfolding during the session, a time when the seeds of change are planted. Instead of giving interpretations, the counselor provides an opportunity for the family members to be themselves by freely expressing what they are thinking and feeling. Whitaker did not treat families. Instead, he saw his role as creating, with the family, a context in which change can occur through a process of reorganization and reintegration (Becvar & Becvar, 2012).

As a counselor, Whitaker strove to grasp the complex world of a family by focusing on impulses and symbols. He was interested in going beyond the surface level of interactions by dealing with symbolic meanings of what evolved between the family and himself. In his sometimes outrageous style, he gave voice to his own impulses and fantasies, and in doing so he encouraged family members to become more accepting of their moment-by-moment experiencing (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013).

Whitaker talked about the process of family counseling in anywhere from three phases (engagement, involvement, and disentanglement) to eight (pre-counseling, the blind date, the early mid-phase, the central work phase, the full alliance, the impasse, the augmented impasse, and the ending). According to Keith (2000), the counselor’s role changes throughout counseling. During the early phases, the counselor assumes an all-powerful position from deciding who will be in counseling and why to setting the logistics and boundaries of the sessions, and the counselor’s relationship to the family. Initially, the counselor increases the anxiety a family is experiencing so that family members are challenged to recognize interpersonal patterns. In this context, families are almost forced to come up with alternative ways of operating.3 At various times in counseling, the counselor shifts from being a dominant and parental figure to being an advisor and a resource person. The more authentic the expression of the family members becomes, the less overt the interventions of the counselor. Eventually, family members are expected to assume responsibility for their own living and changing. As the family assumes more independence, the co-counselors generally become more personal and less involved in the family system. The counseling team respects the family’s initiative as it moves toward termination or ending.

Because this approach emphasizes the counselor’s personal characteristics over the use of techniques, counseling for the counselor is viewed as being essential. This counseling may include marital and family counseling, as well as personal counseling to increase the counselor’s access to his or her own creativity. The reason behind recommending family counseling for counselors—coupled with the study of their own family—is not only to assist them in the process of individuation from their families but also to help them establish a greater sense of belongingness to their families (Keith, 2000, 2015). Counselors, like families, must learn to hold the tension between opposite positions in their own dialectics.

**Process and Interventions**

In Whitaker’s model, change must be experienced rather than understood or designed. Families will tend to stay the same unless the counselor can disturb or frustrate the family process. Keith (2000) put this notion as follows: “Whether they change or not has to do with their level of desperation, which must outweigh the pressure for homeostasis, or remaining the same” (p. 118). Within the symbolic experiential counseling session, the focus of techniques is on expressing blocked affect.

Whitaker believed that the person of the counselor is the main therapeutic factor that facilitates change within a family. He did not use planned techniques or structured exercises but placed emphasis on being with a family. His interventions were aimed at challenging the symbolic meaning that people gave to events. In his view, the ability to be caring, vital, firm, and unpredictable is a more effective therapeutic instrument than any technical strategies (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988).

. . . symbolic experiential interviewing methods are not founded on a unitary model; there is no manual. But there is caring founded on some sort of empathy, which penetrates into the family’s living. Caring and empathy are fundamental ingredients of the attention that adds energy. (Keith, 2015, p, 131)

Still, there are some interventions that seem to re-occur regularly in Whitaker’s work (see Keith 2015; Whitaker, 1989; Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988). These include:

* **Caring and attention:** Symbolic experiential counseling has as its foundation a form of caring in which the counselor is willing to enter into the family system with an interest in helping the people in the system to experience themselves and each other more fully. “Caring includes toughness, expectations, differentiation. Attention + Caring = Empathy. Attention and Caring, defined interpersonally, constitutes involvement and personal responsibility” (Keith, 2015, p, 152).
* **Play and specifically parallel play:** In Whitaker’s work, play is a dialectic. The more you can play, the greater your capacity for seriousness. Play is at the heart of what he considers “craziness.” If one is free to be crazy, one is also free to adapt, to be sane. Among the many kinds of play that Whitaker integrated into his work, many were physical encounters of the kind we see young children enacting. He was especially fond of wrestling, piling on, and even hitting, although he often padded the aggression of hitting with large boxing gloves or the use of batacas. Symbolically acting out one’s fears and negative emotions reduces the toxic nature of one’s impulses and transforms them into less-threatening forms of play.

Whitaker also played with language, ideas and possibilities. Often in an effort to seed the unconscious, he would suggest notions and options that many people would never consider—and which seldom are suggested as part of counseling. In another part of the interview with the family I featured at the beginning of the chapter, Whitaker suggested to one of the adult daughters that if she was having trouble with men, maybe she should be a lesbian. When the daughter admitted that she had thought of that, he took it even farther and suggested that maybe the safest relationship would be incest with her sister, a notion that led him to play with the idea of what constitutes a practical taboo. Although many family practitioners might consider these therapeutic musings inappropriate, playing with ideas not only seeds the unconscious, but it clearly opens up further communication about serious concerns within the family.

* **Therapeutic sharing:** If the counselor can manage to share parts of his or her life without becoming the client, then the picture of the counselor’s own realness can provide a model for greater expression and experiencing in the family. Whitaker often did this by expressing what he was thinking and feeling in reaction to family members or family processes. He clearly did not share everything, and even he would admit that there is a large amount of experienced and educated intuition in choosing what to bring out and what to leave alone. As a general guide, he tended to share parts of himself to normalize family experiences, increase existential anxiety in the service of movement, or to seed the unconscious.  
    
  As Keith (2015) notes: “Carl Whitaker’s idea that our style of psychotherapy is parallel play is not a theory. It is an incomplete metaphorical model; it is more appropriately—a suggestion” (p. 149).
* **Paradox, double messages (double binds), and dialectics:** The concepts of **paradox** and **double binds** are more highly associated with strategic family counseling, and is more fully developed in Chapter Ten of the book. Paradox often is used to direct clients to continue what they are doing rather than to try to give something up. Double binds are contradictory messages from which an individual cannot escape and that often lead to confusion or even desperation in the individual. Whitaker differentiated his use of paradox and double binds from simple mechanical exercises by noting that their use was in the service of real intimacy—indeed, an integration of even greater intimacy.  
    
  A tolerance for ambiguity is essential for learning to enjoy the dialectics of life. Keith (2015) lists 11 dialectical possibilities that are often introduced into the thinking and experiencing of the family:  
  + Any solution can become a problem.
  + Strength on one depends on a partner’s weakness.
  + Imposition of order generates chaos.
  + Pushing increase in chaos stimulates order.
  + Corollary: Imposition of order with insufficient irony, primary process, or play generates chaos.
  + Enthusiasm produces entropy (resistance).
  + Anxiety about ambiguity leads to single-mindedness and pseudo-certainty.
  + Admiration conceals seeds of scorn.
  + Pretentiousness signifies unacknowledged fear of being stupid.
  + Arrogance is generated by emptiness.
  + Saying “no” suggests fear of the possibility that goes with “yes.” (pp. 166-167)

In the counseling session at the beginning of the chapter, Whitaker engaged the youngest daughter of the family in a discussion about meanness and even murder that exemplifies his use of paradox and double messages. He said to Gail:

**Whitaker:**  You have to be as mean as hell to make it. Have you ever learned to be mean?

**Gail:**  Oh, that’s another good one! I’m basically too good to be mean!

**Whitaker:** That’s what I’m worried about. That’s how Mother is. She’s too good to even get in heaven. I don’t think they could stand her. God would be embarrassed.

**Gail:**  She is a good woman. . . . She is a person.

**Whitaker:** I didn’t see any evidence of it! All I saw was her pain and suffering and emptiness. I don’t even believe her story about the old man. I think she did it to him. She made him push her around, so she could be a nobody and blame him for it. It sounds like you’re doing the same thing.

**Gail:** No. I’m not exactly like her.

**Whitaker:** . . . Do you ever get mean inside? You know, like you’d like to kill the whole gang? . . . You’ve got to learn to be murderous! You’ve got to be able to feel like killing people inside of yourself in order to get to be a person. Otherwise, you will end up being a sucker. Mother has never had the courage to even want to kill anybody, unless it was me.

* **Evolving a crisis:** If a kind of “meta-event” with the power of a psychological orgasm occurs within the counseling session, then stimulating it—to evolve into a full- blown crisis—is one way to release the family into a greater sense of becoming. This is what happens in Whitaker’s session when he starts to have yet another conversation with the father about tractors, and Vanessa bursts into a raging anger. When these events happen, Whitaker believes it is probably best to let them just hang in the air, rather than trying to resolve them in some artificial attempt at meaning.4
* **Seeding the unconscious:** This refers to Whitaker’s process of taking a family member’s inference far beyond anything the family member normally would consider. These psychological seeds suggest the forbidden, the taboo, the anxiety-provoking, and the hidden. These seeds are symbolic and emanate from the counselor’s fantasy. The counselor owns them so that the family is free to disregard them or attach meaning as each family member sees fit. At one point in Whitaker’s sessions with the family, Vanessa asked what she could do about her “boyfriend problem.”

**Whitaker:** That’s a great fantasy! I tell you what . . . I just thought of a solution. Become a lesbian!

**Vanessa:** I’ve thought of that.

**Whitaker:** You see? Why are you asking me? You already have the answer. Then you won’t have to worry about boyfriends at all.

**Vanessa:** But that didn’t work.

**Whitaker:**  That didn’t work? Well maybe it’s because you didn’t find the right woman.

**Vanessa:**  I thought of that.

**Whitaker:** Do you know . . . I never thought of that . . . do you think that incest between sisters would be taboo? (*laughter*) Between brothers it is, but I don’t see how it could be between sisters. (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, p. 150)

* **Silence:** Whitaker used silence to let counseling be, to let it percolate. “Silence is its own communication” (Whitaker, 1989, p. 192). In symbolic experiential counseling, silence is associated with the freedom to transcend social demands, the need for progress, and even the family as a whole. It is what Whitaker called vegetating, and it happens in the solitude of quiet where there is freedom to think and feel. Whitaker may have had other purposes in mind when, in the early part of his career, he would appear to doze off in counseling sessions, but he worked with an ever-present co-counselor and his retreats into silence or even sleep gave him time to reflect on his experiences with the family and the feelings he had in response to them.

Out of silence often came some of Whitaker’s more intuitive suggestions. He might talk about a dream he was just having or even share a sexual fantasy, two types of interventions that he did much less as he got older. Still, relaxing into silence often led to some surprising and intuitive leaps. Once, while a couple continued their argument about money and finances, Whitaker emerged out of silence to say.

**Working with Couples**

No one in symbolic-experiential relational counseling has done more to address coupling and marriage in America than Gus Napier (1988): And no one writes more intimately about his own coupling experience and marriage to Margaret, who is also his co-therapist in couples work. A good part of their early marriage was about establishing equality of value, time, space, energy and relational maintenance in their life together. The search for this same kind of equality is at the heart of their work as relational practitioners working with couples. Napier delineated the questions that permeated both their personal and professional partnerships:

How could we develop a relationship that was both deeply intimate and thoroughly equal? Could we manage to be autonomous, to maintain our separate identities, and yet work closely together? Could we achieve real parity, real equality between ourselves, something we increasingly saw at least our women clients wanting in their marriages? Could we combine two careers and yet manage to raise our children successfully? Could we offer our clients an example of a growing, changing relationship; or would we be living kind of a professional lie? (xxi-xxii)

For the Napiers and for all couples, these questions take a lifetime to answer and to reconsider our answers, and to reconstruct our lives together—sometimes on a daily basis. Because the truth is that coupled relationships are heavily influenced by the experienced relationship emanating from our parents when we were children. And their relationship was shaped by both the society in which they lived and, of course, their own parents’ relationship. There is a lot to overcome in any intimate relationship. Every couple brings the relationship they have with themselves, including all the incorporated patriarchy, cultural and normative behaviors, and the desires we all have for independence and connection. Again, from Gus Napier (1988):

Even if society dictates that men and women should behave in certain ways, it is fathers and mothers who teach those ways to children—not just in the words they say, but in the lives they lead. [I would add that this is true even when children are raised by two men or two women or even two people with non-binary identification, because we are all being raised in a binary world.] Much of what we become is powerfully determined by childhood experience; and if we are to change our lives, we need to understand these often hidden influences. Only then can we begin to alter the “rules of living” which we learned as children. (p, xxiii)

Most couple relationships can be assessed through what Napier’s (1988) use of six dimensions: closeness versus distance; power versus vulnerability; depth of meaning in the relationship; equity; flexibility; and time—with the first two dimensions accounting for most of the initial presenting issues in a troubled relationship. The goal of couples counseling is increase authentic living within the relationship, to balance the work and the joys, to resolve issues with the wellbeing of both people in mind, and to help the people involved build a preferred life together.

* Beneath the surface, our mate is very much like us, and comes from a fundamentally similar situation in life.
* There is also some kind of hierarchy in every marriage, and it is often based on an implicit contract in which one person plays “parent” to the other’s “child.” These behaviors are carried over from both partners’ childhood roles in their families of origin. An oldest, overresponsible child may marry a youngest child who is accustomed to caretaking, for example. Or independent of sibling order, a parental child may marry a rejected child who didn’t receive enough caretaking.
* These caretaking arrangements may be obviously mutual and shared; often, each person acts in a parental way toward the partner in at least some aspect of the marriage. But even if they seem highly unequal, there is always some form of reciprocity between the partners. Even when one partner seems to be “parent” in almost every respect and the other is in an exclusively “child” role, the parental partner is still meeting his or her dependency needs through caretaking the other partner.
* These “helping” contracts replicate in both partners the experience of living in their respective families of origin. These “hypnotic” associations inhibit many aspects of both partners’ lives, particularly their freedom to deal openly with anger and to feel freely sexual.
* At some point in the marriage, these helping arrangements, which are the major impediment to an equal relationship, will fail. When this failure occurs, both partners will be required to face their childhood disappointments in their parents.
* Our partner will prove adept at making us face ourselves and our core problems from childhood. This person will expose our vulnerabilities, and call upon us to develop new strengths.
* The encounter with ourselves and our histories will sometimes become so excruciating that it will seem that unless things change, we will have to leave the relationship, or regress into some very frightening early-childhood experiences.
* If we survive these tests, this relationship has enormous potential for companionship, and for mutual support. (pp. 230-231)

Much of the actual work with couples is similar to the processes that have been formalized in the dialogues of Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt (1988/2019). Napier adds an initial exploration of marital issues and families of origin before orienting the couple to the work before them. This orientation includes: (a) avoiding blame and approaching problems as something owned by the couple; (b) dealing with anger by not putting off talking just because of potential anger and agreeing that some of the weapons of anger are off-limits; (c) learning the art of self-disclosure and empathic listening, including:

1. Describing the context in which the experience you want to share is happening;
2. Describe feelings, using I-messages;
3. Make a request that will alleviate negative feelings or change the process or doing of the problem;
4. Take part of the responsibility: Problems are always owned by both people in the relationship;
5. Respond with empathy to your partner’s self-disclosure;
6. Ask for something in return: Relationships are often transactional;
7. Keep your sense of humor.

Counseling in this model often involves a contract between the partners for change, the steps of which are based on common sense:

1. Both partners must really want to change: “As noxious as they sometimes seem, our conflicts have served a purpose in our lives. If we are to change our behavior, we must be willing to find healthier replacements for the subtle rewards we have derived from them” (p, 354).
2. It must be an agreement in which both people change the pattern(s).
3. The goal needs to be clearly defined in behavioral terms so that each person knows what she or he is doing as well as what the other is doing.
4. Each partner needs to give the other person time and space to make needed changes, including time and space for relapses, for failure, and for trying things out and renegotiating.
5. Keep notes about your personal progress: Document how you are changing, when change is implemented, and when it is noticed—as well as whether the change makes a difference.
6. Plan a time in which both partners review the changes made, the change process, and the results.
7. Change your own behavior even if your partner does not enact change.

**Symbolic-Experiential Counseling with the Quest Family**

Jane made the initial contact, stating that she needed help with her boys, and she wondered if the counselor would see her with them. The symbolic-experiential counselor asked if Jane were a single parent and who else might be in the family. Jane noted that she was married to Paul and had two older children, both girls, but insisted that the problem was really between her and the two boys.

**Counselor:** Well, why don’t you round everyone up: Dad, your four children, and you, and then we can meet.

**Jane:** Well, I don’t know if I can do that. Paul is a doctor, and he is very busy. I don’t think he really believes in counseling or counseling.

**Counselor:** I see. Well, we have a problem then, because I don’t work with individuals, just families.

**Jane:** Well, the boys and I are a family together. Couldn’t you see us just one time to get a sense of what is going on?

**Counselor:** No, I’m sorry, but that wouldn’t work.

**Jane:** But Paul and the girls don’t even know I am calling you.

**Counselor:** I think it might be important to tell them—and to mention that I would need to see all of you.

**Jane:** I just can’t involve them right now.

**Counselor:** Okay. You certainly have a right to make that choice.

**Jane:** So you will see just me and the boys?

**Counselor:** No. I didn’t say that.

**Jane:** Okay. Okay. I will try to get everyone together.

**Counselor:** Great. Call me when you have that arranged.

The symbolic-experiential practitioner begins the session by reviewing with the family how he was first contacted, and that it was important to him to have everyone present. Paul, Jane, and the four children are all present for the first meeting. The counselor notes that he was aware that Jane felt she had some difficulties with the two boys, who were newly adopted, and wondered if Jane was raising the boys all by herself or if other members were involved too. “The way Mom talks, I get the feeling that she is the only one who wants the boys, and even she has her doubts: The rest of you just want them gone. They’re not really part of this family anyway, are they?” Paul and Amy are the first to react.

**Paul:** That’s not true. I’m just very busy at work, always have been.

**Counselor:** I don’t buy that for a moment. I don’t think Jane would have felt the need to limit the meeting in the first place if you were both on board with parenting these new kids.

**Amy:** If anyone is out of the family, it’s me—and Ann, really. Mom has been so tied up with these two boys that I hardly see her. Ann tries to help out: I don’t think Mom could get along without her, but Mom doesn’t really know what’s going on in Ann’s life.

**Counselor:** Or yours?

**Amy:** Or mine! Definitely not mine. I feel like I am old enough, and I am mostly on my own.

Amy’s response seems to trigger Jane’s tears, but she says nothing. Both Amy and Ann note that they are okay with their parents’ decision to add the boys to the family, but they don’t really feel connected to them yet. “The boys can be difficult,” Amy says. During all of this, Jason and Luke are very talkative, interrupting often, and in constant motion. Jane tries to corral the boys once or twice and to make them sit down. Sometimes, they sit briefly, but then they are on the move again. Paul leans forward to give the boys a stern look, but says nothing.

**Counselor:** Paul, are you interested at all in how Jane is doing with all of this right now?

**Paul:** I already know it’s not going well.

**Counselor:** Would you ask her what she’s experiencing?

**Paul:** (turning to Jane) It doesn’t seem to be going well.

**Counselor:** Are you interested in what she’s experiencing or not really?

**Paul:** What are you experiencing?

**Jane:** I’m exhausted. They exhaust me. This goes on morning to night, and if it were not for Ann, I would be lost. I know you are busy and gone, but I wish you would help out more. I wish you were home more, and that you made time for the boys the way you used to do for Amy and Ann.

(Turning to the counselor) Both of the boys were terribly hurt in their young lives, and they often seem intent on hurting each other even more.

**Counselor:** Are you done talking to Paul now? Are you interested in his response, or do you just want to avoid it?

**Jane:** (continuing) Jason likes to be the boss of Luke, and Luke sometimes goes along with it and sometimes not. Jason is very loud. Luke is quieter.

**Counselor:** Are you catching Dad up on the boys or just ignoring me?

**Jane:** I don’t know what I’m doing.

Just as the counselor is about to respond, a small fight breaks out between the two boys. Luke pushes his brother and Jason turns around and gives Luke a swift kick to the chin. Luke starts to yell or cry, and Jason retreats behind Amy.

**Paul:** (standing, to Jason, sternly) Sit down, and don’t move!

**Counselor:** (to the parents) Maybe Jason and Luke fight to show the two of you how it’s done. Maybe if the two of you had it out, they wouldn’t have to.

**Jane:** I am trying to set a good model for them about not fighting.

**Counselor:** Yes. You are being very good and suffering, and they are being very bad and getting on with their lives. Hell, they even seem to enjoy it!

**Jane:** So you want Paul and me to kick and hit each other.

**Counselor:** Is that how you fight?

**Jane:** No. We don’t fight. When we can, we talk it out.

**Counselor:** But mostly, you suffer, and Paul stays at work, and Amy goes to school, and Ann tries to rescue her mother, and the boys are the only ones living life the way they want to. Do you think it is even remotely possible that Paul could handle your suffering, or have you given up on him?

Jane begins to talk to Paul about how lonely she feels, raising the two boys. She wishes he were more available to her and to Jason and Luke. She believes that the two boys need him in their lives. Paul responds that he feels supervised by Jane when he is around the boys. It’s not like when they were raising Amy and Ann. Then he felt like the girls belonged to both of them, and they were “on the same page” when it came to raising them. Now he feels like the boys really belong to Jane, and she watches him as if he were going to hurt them or something.

While they are talking, Ann gets up and quietly and effectively removes a plastic hanger from Luke who is about to use it to hit Jason. Then she returns to her seat.

**Counselor:** (to Ann) Nice going. I feel very partial to that hanger, and I hate to see blood on it.   
 (Turning to the parents) Look, if what you are both saying is anywhere close to real, then both of you are lost. Jane is alone, lonely, deserted, and she uses the excuse of “protection” to supervise Dad and keep control of a situation that is actually out of control. And Paul watches for any sign from Jane that he is not doing something right or isn’t needed, so that he can escape into work—where he feels competent. In the meantime, Ann goes about quietly taking care of whatever needs to be handled.

**Ann:** That sounds right to me.

**Jane:** So you’re saying that if I leave Paul and the boys alone that Paul will do more with them.

**Counselor:** I doubt it. He’s as afraid of them as you are.

**Jane:** I don’t remember saying anything about being afraid of the boys.

**Counselor:** Of course you are. You stay on top of the boys all the time, because you are afraid of what they will do. So is Paul. He just arranges not to have to see it. If you are not afraid of them, you do different things with them than you are doing.

**Jane:** Like what?

**Counselor:** What did you do with Amy and Ann when they were Jason and Luke’s ages?

**Jane:** I played with them.

**Paul:** That’s the problem. We don’t really know how to play with them. I don’t know how to play with them at all.

In the second session, the counselor brings a two-inch foam mat to the center of the room. The boys immediately run and jump on it while the rest of the family watch, looking at the counselor and hoping to get some direction. The counselor suggests that maybe the boys should drag the old man onto the mat and teach him how to wrestle. As the boys pull at Paul, Amy and Ann almost instinctively push their father who grabs at Amy. They all fall to the mat. Ann joins them and the whole group is soon rolling around and piling on Dad.

**Jane:** Be careful now.

Ann reaches up for her mother and pulls Jane in with the rest of them. In just moments, all of them are rolling around, taking turns piling on each other. No one is getting hurt. There is laughter and screaming and jumping and lots and lots of contact. While Luke rides Paul’s back, Paul is also arm wrestling with Jason, let- ting him win, but putting on a great show of it. Amy and Ann are tickling Luke and their mother. For the first time since counseling began, they all look like they are having fun, like they are alive.

**Counselor:** (sitting on the edge of the mat) I’m beginning to think that there may be some hope for all of you. Jane, you still seem like a reluctant participant in all of this. What’s going on for you?

**Jane:** First I was afraid that the boys would get hurt, that everyone would be too rough with them. They’ve been so abused in their lives. Then I was afraid the boys would hurt Paul, because they can be so rough too.

**Counselor:** You can’t fully love someone if you aren’t willing to hurt them occasionally or be hurt by them.

**Jane:** I guess I worry too much.

**Counselor:** I guess you’ll have to decide whether you are ready to live life or want to sit on the sidelines watching it go by.

In a short while, Amy and Ann each pick up one of the boys and seem to leave Paul and Jane in the middle of the mat. The parents are talking about what they are feeling in the middle of this playground: What it was like to have the boys crawling on them and to have Amy and Ann all piled in together. But mostly they talk about missing each other and missing the ease of their lives together. This time, however, they are not blaming Jason or Luke, but seem to be searching for each other in terms of their shared hopes and desires. The counselor remains quiet, listening but removed. As Paul and Jane seem to wind down, having said what was on their minds, Paul reaches out for Luke and takes him in his arms. He holds the boy close and firmly, rocking him back and forth, and simulating wrestling sounds.

**Counselor:** That’s the nice thing about having more than one child. There is always another one to hold. (Getting up to leave the room) I’ll see all of you next week.

**Contributions to Multicultural Counseling and Gender Issues**

Although there is nothing in the almost atheoretical symbolic-experiential approach that either supports or denies a multicultural perspective, it is hard to understand how this model, as it is most commonly demonstrated, could be positively received by those cultures for which respect and saving face are central to the culture’s worldview. For example, the self-disclosures and confrontational nature of symbolic-experiential counseling would almost certainly have to be significantly modified for people from many of the Asian cultures. Still, Whitaker always focused on the relationship between himself and the family: He believed that effectiveness in counseling involved being able to join with families and family members. He, as well as some of his colleagues who integrated a structural orientation with experiential counseling (for example, Gus Napier), would find ways to adapt their approach and address cultural differences. Sherry Cormier (personal communication, March 23, 2005) suggests that this approach may be inherently multicultural because of the unique adaptation the counselors make to each individual family system—and because of the realness and authenticity of the counselor.

In the area of gender issues and sexual and affectional orientation, Whitaker and his colleagues have been much more vocal than they are in relation to cultural diversity. As I have already mentioned, Whitaker held women in high regard, as well as appreciating those qualities most associated with women’s development (such as nurturance, intuition, expressiveness, caring, and vulnerability, to name a few). Although he did not write directly about these qualities, it is evident from his work that he valued them. Napier and Whitaker (1978) actually noted the contributions made by the women’s movement to family life, calling the wife-and-mother “the pioneer [who helps everyone in the family to] achieve both a sense of individual autonomy *and* a sense of closeness and unity” (p. 234). Napier (1988) carries this sense of autonomy and closeness into the arena of coupling and marriage in one of the most important books related to couples counseling. He and his partner, Margaret, help couples in their Atlanta-based practice to maintain both a sense of self and connection to the other.

What made Whitaker so unusual in the field of family counseling was his willingness to confront, challenge, and even chide men during counseling sessions. More than almost any other family counselor, Whitaker seemed to believe that humanizing males was central to his work, and he regularly worked at opening up males to much more intimacy than most ever dreamed was possible. His belief that a multiplicity of roles is possible in families at a symbolic “as if ” level has provided many opportunities for humanizing men and creating more intimacy. Whitaker and Keith (1981) suggested that, if a young son asked his father if he could serve part of the dinner that the father often served, the father should respond: “Sure, you sit over in this chair and serve the meat and potatoes, and I’ll sit in your place and complain” (p. 190).

Whitaker and his associates also demonstrate an enormous appreciation for the diversity of sexual and affectional orientations in their work—although taken out of context, Whitaker’s recommendation of same-sex partnerships for heterosexuals, who find dealing with the other sex frustrating, can seem demeaning to some members of the LGBT community. And although Whitaker’s writings occasionally approached marriage as important and even therapeutic (although it is legally denied to lesbian and gay individuals in most states), his actual practice was always open to couples involving any two people of either gender who sought real intimacy in their lives.

The limitation related to this approach with multicultural clients and even with regard to gender and sexual and affectional orientation is that a disregard for theory and political realities leaves many important issues unexamined or, worse, inconsistently addressed. Although feminists might appreciate many of the attributes that Whitaker brought to the therapeutic process (Luepnitz, 1988/2002), Whitaker was not a feminist counselor. His model does an extremely good job of addressing relationships between individuals, family members, and either of these with the counselor, but it provides little or no perspective on social activism.

**Summary**

In some ways, Whitaker’s symbolic-experiential approach to family counseling is not unlike other approaches that focus on the counselor-client relationship. Like Satir’s human validation process model, and individual approaches such as existential counseling, person-centered counseling, and Gestalt therapy, symbolic-experiential counseling assigns a central role to the importance of the counselor as a person and views the quality of the therapeutic relationship as significantly affecting the process and outcomes of counseling. Symbolic-experiential family counseling applies many of the processes of these relationship-oriented therapies to working with families. Relying on empathy, intuition, joining, spontaneous interactions, enactments, and experiments, the experiential counselor attempts to understand the family’s dynamics and to create experiences that will lead to family vitality, growth, and change. It is clear that this approach places primary value on counselor self-awareness and the full use of the counselor’s self in encountering a family.

Whitaker’s insistence on “non-theory” foreshadows the efforts of social constructionists to confront the dominant culture and change standardized and fixed approaches to functionality. Indeed, feminists see in Whitaker someone willing to “play with patriarchy” (Luepnitz, 1988/2002, p. 88), to change role patterns and role definitions so completely that meanings are turned upside down and inside out. Whitaker confronted men in counseling more than almost any other counselor, and he also was able to get to their vulnerability better than most. He had been known to tell men that they were hopeless, that they could not stand their own envy of women who give birth, and that women were constantly struggling to bring them alive. In a film from the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, he told a client who had said that he could never accept his mother’s nurturance, “I know; that’s what makes your wife’s job so gruesome.”

Symbolic-experiential family counselors add an organic-growth lens to counseling that asks family practitioners to consider what seeds they are planting and whether the ground is fertile, prepared, or disturbed enough to facilitate growth and change. Like a great gardener, Whitaker often spent more time removing weeds than providing structure. Symbolic-experiential counselors remind us that individuals and systems have all the resources within themselves if they are challenged and freed to evolve.

Whitaker liked to be part of a co-counseling team. He felt that having a co-counselor freed him to act in whatever manner seemed to fit the situation; he knew that his co-counselors would be available to help the family deal with what had happened. Over the years, Whitaker teamed with some of the most sensitive and innovative family counselors in the field, including Thomas Malone, Gus Napier, and David Keith, to name a few. This co-counseling arrangement allows for a sharing of the emotional involvement of the therapeutic process. Furthermore, the practice affords both counselors opportunities to have fun together, to disagree, to embellish on each other’s interventions, and to model creative and productive interaction (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013).

Keith (2000, 2015) maintains that practicing family counseling stirs up emotional reactions in the counselor. Because counter-transference tends to be unconscious, the use of a co-counselor lessens the danger of acting out such feelings with a family. Each counselor can use his or her subjectivity more freely when the colleague can function as a counterbalancing force. For example, Napier and Whitaker (1978) would express their thoughts and consult about the family during the counseling session.

If you are interested in a more in-depth study of this approach, I recommend the following sources: Keith (2000; 2015); Kempler (1981); Napier (1988); Napier and Whitaker (1978); Whitaker (1989); Whitaker and Bumberry (1986, 1988); and Whitaker and Malone (1953/1981).

**Where to Go from Here**

There is no specific society or organization of symbolic-experiential counselors. Many of the most prominent leaders in this mode from Carl Whitaker, Gus Napier, and Thomas Malone to Thomas Leland, John Warkentin, and Richard Felder were associated from the early 1960s with the Atlanta Psychiatric Clinic, and most still live in the Atlanta area. Before Whitaker’s death, he was a prominent member of the faculty at the Evolution of Psychotherapy conferences, sponsored by the Milton Erickson Foundation. Whitaker and Salvador Minuchin, the most prominent developer of structural family counseling, co-presented many times in multiple arenas: Both men seemed to feed well off each other, both influencing and being influenced by the other. Today, Gus Napier, David Keith, and William Bumberry are the most prolific scholars and contributors to the development of this model.

Three Essential Books on This Model

Keith, D. (2015). *Continuing the experiential approach of Carl Whitaker: Process, practice, and magic.* Zeig, Tucker, & Theisen.

Napier, A. Y. (1988). *The fragile bond: In search of an equal, intimate, and enduring marriage*. Harper & Row.

Whitaker, C. A. (1989). *Midnight musings of a family counselor* (M. Ryan, Ed.). Norton.

Video Resource

As you will see in the symbolic-experiential video segment published on this website, there is always anxiety in a family experiencing distress, but unlike some other models, symbolic-experiential counselors seek to increase the anxiety rather than alleviate it. Whitaker compared his work to surgery, suggesting that in order to remove pathology, the surgeon had to be able to tolerate what is sometimes a significant loss of blood.

Graham Disque is Professor of Counseling at East Tennessee State University. He has a long history of working within an experiential model—even though his own approach has evolved recently into the practice of acceptance therapy and other postmodern approaches. In the video on this website [Jamesrobertbitter.com], he uses two interventions that are highly associated with symbolic-experiential therapy: He asks almost all of his questions in relational form; that is, he frames questions in terms of the relationships that the family members have with each other. He also prods and pokes at family members, especially the mother and father, in an effort to augment the feeling levels of the family and get to more honest, direct interactions.

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Footnotes

1It is important to note that Carl Whitaker was bringing 50 years of experience and the protection of having a co-counselor with him when he made an intervention like this. Family practitioners who are new to the field would run into both legal and ethical difficulties if they modeled this intervention indiscriminately. What made the suggestion of killing “the whole gang” safe in this family was that (a) Gail had no history or capacity for such aggression in her present life; (b) she looked to her mother for any example of how to be aggressive, and her mother was not ready to be aggressive either; and (c) the statement came in the context of the whole family being present and was easily recognized by the group as symbolic. One of the great difficulties of watching the great masters of counseling work is that it is easier to copy what they do than to recognize the process and create our own authentic responses. This case example asks practitioners to consider what their authentic responses would be to Gail who lacks enough aggression (assertiveness) even to claim a place for herself in the family.

2The idea that “therapy is a process that helps the counselor as much as the family” does not change the ethical requirement to, first and foremost, protect the well-being of the family and each of its members. It suggests only that both the client(s) and the counselor(s) can grow and develop within these counseling sessions.

3During the early phases of counseling, when the counselor is more prominent in instigating change, the probability that **transference** issues will arise is very high. This is one reason that Whitaker worked with a co-counselor, and it speaks to the importance of both counselors having worked through their own personal and family issues. A counselor who is not comfortable with his or her own growth and development will find this approach to be very challenging.

4Both evolving a crisis and seeding the unconscious are therapeutic interventions that are designed to escalate emotional experience. There is an ethical responsibility not to engage in these activities in a haphazard way—or simply because the family practitioner has the opportunity. Counselor availability—her or his engaged connection to both self and clients—is essential to the positive use of these interventions.