

# Integration in the practice of Christian counsellors – behaviour, beliefs and being

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Applicants for Member of the Christian Counsellors Association of Australia can use this article as a basis for meeting the Integration Requirement via a paper or structured interview.

Counselling training in Australia has a varied history. It is only in recent years that undergraduate university degrees have become a more popular program of counsellor education, and few courses actually address integration of faith and learning. Previously, counselling training for Christians in particular has been through Lifeline, Anglicare etc or widely varying programs such as Elijah House, Selwyn Hughes and more recently theophostic training. These latter programs tend to teach one particular method and theology rather than giving students a theoretical framework in which to contextualise their thinking. In contrast professional counsellors have studied psychology, social work or welfare studies, usually with very little Christian content and have either had to find ways to think through their own integration of psychology and theology, or have resisted the 'secular' training and have ended up using a model such as those listed above, again without necessarily working through the integration process.

This paper sets out a number of different aspects of integration – behaviour, beliefs and being, that is, worldview beliefs, explicit behaviour and practices, implicit spirituality – to facilitate Christians locating their thinking and practice into the wider context of the integration of counselling and faith. The task of integration is even more pressing in a climate which is much more accepting of spirituality being part of counselling practice. The idea that spirituality can and should be addressed in therapy by both Christians and non-Christians is acknowledged more and more. Referring to religion or spirituality is now seen as an ethical aspect of psychotherapy (for example see the standard text Corey (2001), as well as the numbers of books directly relevant to spirituality published by the American Psychological Association eg Shafranske (1996) and Richards and Bergin (1997), a book which explicitly shows counsellors how to bring spiritual assessment, spiritual therapeutic interventions etc into their counselling). Christians therefore need to be aware of how they will practice with believers and non-believers and how their practice relates to their own beliefs and also those of the people with whom they work.

Integration itself refers to the process whereby two different disciplines or foci are brought

together. In this context integration refers to the ways in which Christians draw on their professional training as counsellors and weave that together with their Christian faith. There are therefore issues of worldview (ways of knowing, morality and values); of counselling theory as well as counselling practice. For integration to have occurred counsellors must have worked through how to combine *both* their counselling training and their faith. Completing training in psychology but then practising from a purely nouthetic counselling model (for example) is not integration. Nor is leaving spirituality for church on Sunday and practising behaviourist psychology on Monday. True integration involves an examination of underlying philosophical beliefs, an investigation of theoretical understanding, a careful exploration of scripture, and a thorough reflection on practices to clarify a conceptual position which is not implicitly contradictory, but which also holds the paradoxes of real life.

## **Behaviour - Explicit practices**

The most obvious kind of integration of faith and counselling can be seen in the behaviour of the counsellor - explicitly Christian practices. That does not imply that counsellors who use 'Christian' practices have integrated faith and learning. It may simply mean they have rejected their training altogether! However explicit behaviour is a concrete starting place for examining integration.

Prayer, use of the Bible, healing of the memories through inviting God into the situation, use of Christian symbols and ritual, deliverance, laying on of hands, and involvement in church life are all Biblically based practices which Christians might draw on in their counselling practice. In most cases these practices would be used only if the clients were Christians and had given permission for their use. Some church counselling centres may use these practices routinely, believing that if people come to an openly Christian centre, they must be willing to accept such practice. Professional training would indicate that permission should always be sought for practices which are not readily used by the profession, and Christians should differentiate between 'ministry' and 'counselling' as a part of duty of care. Tan (1996) explains the use of a number of these practices but also notes that "If the client shows no interest at all in religion or spiritual issues, then the therapist has to respect the client's preferences" (p 370).

Many Christian counsellors have heard anecdotal evidence of practices which are clearly disrespectful of uninformed clients and which can amount to spiritual abuse when used

without explanation or choice being given. Nelson and Wilson (1984) suggest three ethical guidelines for using explicit practices: a) when dealing with clinical problems which would be helped by spiritual or religious intervention, b) if they are working within the person's own belief system, and c) if they have carefully defined the counselling agreement to include these practices or resources.

Integration of these practices then, would involve the counsellor thinking through their beliefs about the nature of the person, the nature of dis-ease, and the process of healing. The counsellor should be able to articulate their position on each of these areas and thus justify their use of whatever practices they employ. For example if a counsellor believes that healing comes through a renewing of the mind, a change of habitual thought patterns, and integrates this with a theoretical context of cognitive behavioural understanding they would be entirely consistent in helping a self-identified Christian client recognise unbiblical thought patterns and replacing these with verses which fit with the context of Biblical thinking as a whole – for example an understanding of grace and God's acceptance.

Another counsellor who believes that much adult behaviour is caused by childhood wounding or abandonment issues is more likely to draw on a psychodynamic understanding of attachment and to use inner healing, relating to helping the client find God as the longed-for parent. They may agree to pray together and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal keys to healing. This is again an integration of theoretical and theological understandings.

While these theoretical positions and practices may be in contrast to each other, they are both evidence of integration of faith, counselling theory and explicit practice. This contrasts with the 'uninformed eclecticism' of those who may, for example, pray for inner healing without knowing how it relates to any counselling theory or a consistent view of how healing occurs.

Counsellors should think through any 'explicitly Christian' practices and understand how they relate to their theological and theoretical beliefs. It is important too that they become aware of how they explain these practices and how they ask permission for their use with clients. Recognising the breadth of Christian theology and practice is important here. A traditional Anglican may be very comfortable with the use of a crucifix as part of counselling, but be afraid of inviting the presence of the Holy Spirit, whereas a Pentecostal may feel just the reverse. It is important that counsellors do not assume that because someone is a Christian they will be accepting of any practices the counsellor may be familiar with, or those

which fit into their particular church experience. Ethical standards are just as relevant to church counselling centres as to professional or community centres and need to be observed in all settings.

As Tan (1996) points out there are situations in which counsellors should be very careful with spiritual practices even if the client has given permission: "Even if it is appropriate or timely to deal with spiritual issues openly in therapy, the therapist should be sensitive to the client's pace, as well as respect the client's freedom of choice and responsibility in making personal decisions. In a situation where supportive therapy may be needed in order to prevent or retard disintegration in a severely disturbed client, the therapist should refrain from confronting the client's religious convictions or beliefs, even if they may appear to be somewhat neurotic or unhealthy, until a later time when the client is more stabilized emotionally and able and willing to engage in such discussion or caring confrontation" (p 377).

While the behaviour of the counsellor is a good indicator of whether or not they use explicitly 'Christian' practices it does not necessarily show whether or not they have integrated faith and training.

### **Implicit Christian practices: being**

Every Christian counsellor in whatever setting will have 'implicit Christian practices'. This may be as broad as praying for the clients of the day before going to work, valuing freedom of choice for their clients, respecting choice of church attendance, developing their own 'Christian character' – fruit of the spirit, silently inviting God's guidance during a session, responding to an intuitive/ Spirit-led sense of where hurt may be.

Some Christians may practice counselling without ever mentioning God's name – and yet 'be Jesus' to those they are ministering to. Others may consistently and consciously follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in a setting where they could not tell their clients that that is what they are doing. Others may carefully search the scriptures to understand how to bring healing through biblical principles without naming the Bible as their source.

Tan (1996) states that implicit integration "refers to a more covert approach that does not initiate the discussion of religious or spiritual issues and does not openly, directly, or systematically use spiritual resources like prayer and Scripture or other sacred texts, in therapy" (p 368).

An essential part of integration is the counsellors' own being – their spiritual growth and personal integrity. Jesus told us to take the log out of our own eye before we seek to

remove the speck from our brother's eye. Our own inner journey has an enormous impact on those we minister to. Unless we are continually doing our own inner work we will become unable to see clearly to walk with others. People are far more aware of who we are than what we do. They intuit whether our responses give grace or judge them. They sense our inner turmoil or place of peace. The research has shown over and over that more healing comes through the relationship than through any other aspect of counselling. Our ability to relate is directly the most influential part of any practice.

An essential part of integration then, is to examine our own spirituality, our own relationship with God and others, with the purpose of growing in grace – into the maturity of Christ. All our practices whether 'Christian' or 'secular' should be examined in the light of Jesus' example as well as the essentials of our faith. Tan (2001) labels this "most foundational area of integration" as Personal integration. As Bufford (1997) points out, the person, life and work of the counsellor is the core of consecrated Christian counselling – which is primarily about character.

A further development of implicit integration is the use of practices in a way which is sensitive to the client's own beliefs and development. Johnson (2001) discusses the way in which Christians can help those with whom they work come 'one step closer' to God through implicit rather than explicit use of scripture. She describes an encounter with a man who is not a believer but who is greatly helped by the use of metaphor – a metaphor which represents a biblical truth of forgiveness and grace without naming its source.

Tan (1996) points out that counsellors may "be comfortable and competent practicing both implicit *and* explicit integration in psychotherapy, depending on the client's needs and interests. In other words, for some clients, for example those who are not religious or who are not interested in exploring spiritual issues further or using religious resources explicitly, the therapist might adopt an implicit integration model. For other clients who are more religiously oriented and want to pursue a direct and open religiously oriented therapy, the therapist might adopt an explicit integration model" (p368).

Both the person of the counsellor (being) and their actual behaviour and counselling practice are important aspects of integration. A third essential part of integration is the counsellors' belief system – their worldview. This relates more to the integration of their counselling training, their understanding of the theoretical framework of what they have learned and how this fits together with their Christian belief system. As counselling practices are grounded

in psychological theory and our Christian beliefs fit into our own personal or denominational theology, this aspect of integration is a complex combining of psychology and theology to form our worldview. Our worldview beliefs themselves will dictate how we negotiate the integration of these complex sets of ideas.

### **A). Worldview beliefs – How to integrate, or not**

Worldview is the foundation of integration, and yet is the most implicit of our beliefs, the perhaps unexamined ground of our practices both implicit and explicit. Worldview refers to our core beliefs, our presuppositions which influence all our other beliefs and interpretation of our world. Worldview includes theological understanding, philosophy (everyone being a philosopher, knowingly or not), morality and values. Our worldview will influence which of the counselling theories we are drawn to, and which we resist, it will dictate how we even go about integration.

Numbers of writers categorise different approaches to integration. One of the most cited of these is Carter and Narramore's (1979) description of four basic approaches to integration: 'Christianity Integrates Psychology', opposed by 'Christianity Against Psychology', with the 'Parallels model' and 'Christianity of Psychology', being somewhere between the other two.

Gary Collins, one of the 'fathers' of contemporary Christian counselling argues for the first of these positions of integration by evaluating scientific discovery with the scriptures. In his classic *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, (1988), he explains: "...all truth comes from God, including truth about the people whom God created. He has revealed this truth through the Bible, God's written experience [special revelation], and through the methods of scientific investigation [general revelation]. Discovered truth must always be consistent with, and tested against, the norm of revealed biblical truth. But we limit our counselling effectiveness when we pretend that the discoveries of psychology have nothing to contribute to the understanding and solution of problems. We compromise our integrity when we overly reject psychology but then smuggle its concepts in to our counselling – sometimes naively and without ever realizing what we are doing" (p 22).

Crabb (1977) has called this approach 'spoiling the Egyptians' referring to the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt and taking the jewellery with them. It allows for a learning from the findings of scientific research and general revelation, while sifting all through the filter of the scriptures. For further explanation of general and specific revelation see Collins (1993). Ingram (1997) adds personal revelation

and argues that postmodernism has influenced us to accept the truth of our own experience and reality and this can be done in balance with general and special revelation.

Counsellors who take this integrative position are happy to learn from the research and theories of non-Christians, being careful to evaluate these with the revealed word of God. Eck (1996) labels this Christianity Integrates Psychology approach as within the 'Manipulative Paradigm' because the data from psychology must be altered to be acceptable.

This position is in contrast to several others. At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who say that everything we need is in the Bible and we should not draw from 'worldly' sources. Jay Adams (1979), the developer of nouthetic or 'biblical' counselling, the Bobgans (Bobgan and Bobgan 1979), are authors who take this position. In fact this is not a position of integration at all, but is a rejection of 'general revelation' believing that psychology's view of human nature contradicts the Christian faith. This Christianity Against Psychology position is not seeking integration at all and in fact is labelled by Eck (1996) as the Non-integrative paradigm. See Jones and Butman (1991) for further exploration and counterargument of this position.

Another position which cannot truly be called integration is the Parallels model (Carter and Narramore 1979) – or dualism. This position separates theology and psychology, seeing theology as relevant for Sunday and psychology for the rest of the week, accepting the pastors' verdict on my 'spiritual life' and the psychologists' diagnosis on my psychological life. At its extreme this is actually a false dichotomy dividing the person up in a way that God never intended. In a more conservative version, Separate but Equal (Crabb 1977), the two disciplines at least respect each other but do not attempt integration.

A fourth position is that taken by many Christians – that of uninformed eclecticism, or the Christianity of Psychology, what Crabb (1977) calls 'the tossed salad'. This, at worst, is simply taking ideas from various aspects of psychology and counselling, using some theological language, mixing them all together without evaluation, and then using 'whatever works'. Implicit in responsible Christian counselling, however, is a careful examination of both theory and practice of counselling with an understanding of worldview.

### **B). Worldview beliefs and outworking – theory to practice**

It is important for Christians to understand these various approaches to integration – or lack of it – in order to articulate the basis of their own integration. Having understood this they should also examine the 'content' of their

worldview – the theoretical approaches they draw on – and how these fit with their theology, the values they hold to and the outworking of all of these in their practice. Bouma-Prediger (1990) talks about the integration and examination of presuppositions of psychology and theology as interdisciplinary – a bringing together of the two disciplines; while the next step, the process of thinking through the psychological theory and theology into our counselling practice is on the intradisciplinary level.

This level of integration involves an examination of the theory from which the counsellors practices are drawn. Texts such as Jones and Butman (1991) explore the major secular theories and critique these from a Christian perspective. Conscientious Christian counsellors need to understand how their clinical practice is drawn from a theoretical position and how the foundations of that theory articulate with theology. The examples given at the beginning of this paper referring to cognitive behavioural 'renewing of the mind', and psychodynamic inner healing are instances of such an integrative understanding.

At this level of integration will be a clear understanding of the counsellor's own theological positions also. A theology of suffering, an understanding of freedom and responsibility, a knowledge of the character of God are examples of aspects of theology which will strongly influence a person's approach to counselling. A counsellor whose theology purports to give each individual freedom and agency before God, but who then directs clients to certain actions in an authoritarian way, has clearly not integrated theology and counselling practice.

### **C). Worldview and values**

A third aspect of the counsellors' worldview which will impact their counselling practice is their values. Christians may think that broadly all believers will have similar values – the freedom and dignity of all people, valuing human life, the right to religious freedom, the higher value of relationship with God than worldly success, living according to one's conscience, to name a few. However there are clearly differences in how Christians practice these. The challenge for the Christian counsellor is in learning to hold their own values while giving freedom and responsibility to those they minister to, even if they have different values. At which point does the counsellor feel their own integrity is compromised? When do they feel they should refer on to another counsellor? Issues around homosexuality and premarital sex, divorce and remarriage, abortion and euthanasia may be of particular concern to some Christians while less of an issue for others.

Each counsellor needs to recognise which issues for them are sensitive ones, and how their own values will interact with those they work with.

This paper has attempted to clarify three levels of integration – explicit practices seen in the counsellors' behaviour, being – the person of the counsellor, and beliefs – both in terms of how integration between the two disciplines of psychology and theology can happen, as well as how a particular counselling theory fits with the counsellor's theology and practice and values.

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## Questions to address in integration:

### Explicit practices:

Do you tend towards using explicit Christian practices or implicit ones?

Which explicit practices do you use (scriptures, prayer (who prays?), ritual, deliverance, inner healing prayer, waiting on God, church or group support etc)?

What ethical practices do you use around these – giving explanation, asking permission?

How do you decide which practices you will use and with whom?

How do you address differences between your theology and practice and the theology and practice of those you work with/minister to?

### Implicit practices:

How does implicit practice work for you? How does your faith affect how you are as a counsellor and how you relate to those you minister to?

How do you work on your own spiritual growth and how does this affect your counselling?

How do your Christian beliefs make your counselling different from those trained in the same way, but who are not believers?

Worldview beliefs:

Which of the models of integration do you tend towards?

Which theoretical model/s of counselling do you draw on? How have you modified these?

What reading do you do to continue the process of theory-faith-practice integration?

How do your values influence your practice? What do you do when values relating to your faith are different from those of those you work with/minister to?