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## Teaching Christian Integration in Psychology and Counseling Courses

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# Teaching Christian Integration in Psychology and Counseling Courses

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In the last 45 years, psychologists, counselors, academicians, and pastors have developed a wide variety of models describing the relationship between Christianity and clinical psychology/counseling. Some espouse no interaction between the fields (e.g., *nouthetic counseling*, Adams, 1970), while others advocate for a meaningful interaction (e.g., *integration*, McMinn & Campbell, 2007). Some models expand on how one defines science (e.g., *transformational psychology*, Coe & Hall, 2010) and others on how one conceptualizes psychology itself (e.g., *Christian psychology*, Johnson, 2007). For the sake of reading simplicity, the term “integration” in this special edition encapsulates the models that advocate for some form of meaningful engagement between psychology/counseling and Christianity. We recognize, however, the distinctiveness of these various models embedded in the term as we use it here.

Integration models are now leading to operationalized clinical strategies that are garnering empirical support (See *Evidence-Based Practices for Christian Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Aten, Johnson, Worthington, & Hook, 2013). Novel new intervention strategies likewise merit exploration (See *Transformative Encounters*, Appleby & Ohlschlager, 2013). This is an exciting time for those advocating for a meaningful relationship between Christianity and mental health treatment. One wonders, however, if the

progress in models and intervention strategies has left behind some important aspects.

Meaningful questions remain. Psychology and counseling have numerous specialized bodies of knowledge captured in specific courses. What resources are available for instructors to make them more effective in teaching integration in these courses? Garzon and Hall (2012) observe that current resources are almost nonexistent or quite dated in this area.

Over time, the *Journal of Psychology and Theology (JPT)* has taken the lead in providing resources. One course-specific exploration of teaching integration identified in the literature occurred with *JPT*'s 1995 special edition on undergraduate teaching (volume 23, issue 4). In 2009, *JPT* published another special edition, this time with a focus on new research in how students learn integration and explorations of how to teach integration in graduate education contexts such as classroom learning, non-traditional environments (online), statistics, and clinical supervision in internship. More recently, Devers (2013) published an article in *JPT* encouraging the use of *embodied integration*, a pedagogical strategy building on the idea that the brain relies on bodily states and actions to inform cognition. Accordingly, this special edition of the *JPT* builds on these resources with a focus on course-specific integration at both the undergraduate and graduate psychology and counseling level.

## Current Integration Learning Theory and Research

Course-specific integration must begin with present theories on how students learn integration. Randall Sorenson's theory of how students learn integration stands out as the lone well-articulated and researched

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model in the literature (Sorenson, Derflinger, Bufford, & McMinn, 2004). Basing his ideas on attachment theory (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988; Main & Solomon, 1986), he proposed that students learn integration best through attachment-based mentoring relationships with professors. These relationships, to Sorenson, are the primary mediating pathway that facilitates significant integration learning (Sorenson et al.). Professors who desire their conceptual ideas about integration to be absorbed must seek to develop meaningful relationships with their students.

Research has supported Sorenson's ideas (Sorenson, 1994, 1997; Sorenson et al., 2004, Staten, Sorenson, & Vande Kemp, 1998). These studies have found that students value getting a sense of a professor's spiritual journey or on-going personal relationship with God. Though the professor's Christian worldview definitely influences applied course content, Sorenson suggested that only limited learning of integration will occur without attachment. Attachment varied based on two factors that each involved a continuum. One factor focused on attachment to professors who served as models of Christian faith and integrity (*bulwarks*) on one end of the continuum and as persons who wrestled with experiences, questioned precepts, and changed viewpoints over time (*sojourners*) on the other. The second factor consisted of seeing a professor as interpersonally open and emotionally transparent on one end and with clear role boundaries on the other. Thus, some students gravitated to one side of each factor's pole to facilitate attachment while others gravitated toward the other side. Student personality and expectations likely played an important role but that question has yet to be researched.

Other research has expanded information on professor personality characteristics that students seem to value for attachment. Two qualitative studies of exemplary faculty have been informative. In Sites, Garzon, Milacci, and Boothe's (2009) phenomenological study, students identified eight professors as integration-teaching exemplars. Themes identified for these professors included seeing their faith as inseparable from their practice as professors, and faith naturally outworking into their pedagogy and relationships with students. Supportive of Sorenson's emphasis on the spiritual life of professors, the study highlighted the link between the professors' individual ontological foundation for integration and how integration emerges both in course content and student relationships from this foundation. In another study in a different university setting, Matthias (2008) performed

a qualitative study with seven faculty integration exemplars. In addition to findings similar to Sites et al.'s, Matthias also identified humility as an important faculty exemplar trait.

A two part study with students has also expanded Sorenson's theory. In a survey involving four universities, Ripley, Garzon, Hall, Mangis, and Murphy (2009) found support for Sorenson's attachment model in graduate academic disciplines other than psychology. They also found that institutional environmental factors can facilitate integration. University-wide faith activities and classroom-specific spiritual formation and religious practices facilitated integration learning and were predictive of the importance of integration to students. A qualitative component expanded the same study. Hall, Ripley, Garzon, and Mangis (2009) identified professor-related factors (caring, self-revealing, welcoming, open-minded, and dedicated), curriculum factors (intentionality, presence of diverse opinions on integration, balance between general and special revelation, and pervasiveness of integration), and institutional climate factors (a sense of community, a context of "no barriers" between Christianity and academics, and corporate expressions of Christianity) as being helpful in integration learning. The discovered institutional and curriculum factors add to Sorenson's theory through stressing the importance of creating a broad-based university climate and class learning experience that fosters relational connections and expressions of faith experiences.

### Research on Pedagogical Strategies to Teach Integration

Only a few studies exist in the literature examining pedagogical strategies for teaching integration. In a mixed-methods study, Koch and Doughty (1998) identified four integration levels that are useful in teaching integration across the psychology curriculum. These levels consist of personal integration, exploration of psychology and Christian themes, reading sources that explicitly connect Christianity and psychology, and interacting with content that has a definite emphasis on integrating Christian and psychological themes.

Burton and Nwosu (2003) and Lawrence, Burton, and Nwosu (2005) proposed a pedagogical approach that encourages the development and application of specific learning activities that promote student integration of faith and learning. Applying a mixed-methods design, they discovered that students preferred teaching and learning processes more than any other kind of response, favoring active participation

and peer interaction as crucial elements. The professor's attitude mattered as well; when students sensed genuine care and a godly example from the professor, these promoted the learning of integration. These conclusions support Sorenson's attachment perspective since such learning activities and professor characteristics promote the development of faculty-student relationships and shared experiences compared to traditional lecture format classes.

Stevenson and Young (1995) examined integration-specific courses at Christian universities. They discovered that most universities had at least one course devoted to integration; however, the content of these courses varied widely. The writers concluded that there is a lack of guidelines and clear core set of concepts for these courses that may discourage both experienced and new professors. The importance of teaching integration in core curriculum courses becomes apparent from these results as well.

### Current Findings

Present studies, though limited, support Sorenson's integration learning theory and indicate that the broader institutional climate at Christian universities can either foster or impede integration teaching and learning processes through promoting a sense of safety, openness, and valuing of the integration learning experience. The characteristics of the professor, the pedagogical strategies employed, and the entire curriculum (not just integration-specific courses) play important roles in the process of teaching and learning integration. The emphasis on the entire curriculum points to the importance of this special edition's articles on teaching integration in specific courses.

### Articles in this Special Edition

Articles on common courses for psychology and counseling programs comprise this special edition. We've asked the authors to include resources in their respective subject areas to assist instructors in developing integration-related learning activities. Each article contains practical strategies for teaching integration in the course content involved.

Wayne Adams, Mark McMinn, and Nancy Thurston share specific learning activities that they use to integrate Christian faith and psychological assessment in the classroom. Areas addressed include psychometrics and test development, personality assessment, cognitive assessment, projective assessment, and religious assessment. Since most of the integration literature has focused on clinical interventions, this is an important contribution to aid assessment instructors.

Kaye Cook and Kathleen Leonard surveyed developmental instructors at other CCCU schools to see how these instructors were teaching integration in developmental coursework. The responses enhanced their presentation of an integrated systems model of relational spirituality to serve as a paradigm for conceptualizing development in general and faith development in particular. Out of this framework and interaction with the survey findings, Cook and Leonard present clear pedagogical strategies for teaching integration in this subject area.

Ethics has been a subject with some integrative writing (e.g., Sanders, 2013). Tammy Anderson presents common student integrative issues for this area and two teaching strategies to facilitate the class—having students assess their ethical decision-making heritage and the creative utilization of vignettes to foster growth in students' ethical decision-making skills.

Related to ethics, multicultural competence is an essential component of clinical training. Cynthia Eriksson and Alexis Abernethy examine the history of this area in clinical psychology and counseling, and consider its coursework through the lens of integration. They highlight key theological constructs and interactive teaching strategies to facilitate the development of integrative diversity competence in three crucial areas—self and other, power and justice, and grace and reconciliation.

William Struthers moves beyond the typical lecture-discussion format of many biopsychology courses to describe additional teaching strategies that engage students around three integrative themes—embodiment, emergent agency, and enhancement. The utilization of clinical cases, mock trials, cinema, novels, comic books, and medical technologies sets an interactive tone in an area one might suppose would be difficult to do.

Psychological theories is an area that includes at least two integrative text resources (Jones & Butman, 2011; Tan, 2011), yet overreliance on texts can miss opportunities for essential integration learning in the classroom. Terri Watson and Elisha Eveleigh describe three critical integration tasks in theories courses. These consist of teaching students how to appraise psychological theories from a Christian worldview, how to intervene competently, and how to advocate effectively. A variety of pedagogical strategies drawn from research on effective teaching, the integration literature, and their own experiences are used to teach integration in these three areas.

Richard Butman and Mark Yarhouse begin their analysis of teaching psychopathology integratively by