

Review of: "Against Integration"

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Against integration

Thank you for asking me to review this fascinating and powerful piece of work.

Against Integration presents a compelling and original argument challenging one of the tenets of (most modalities of) psychotherapy: that the therapist aims to support the patient/client in integrating “split off” parts of the self. The aim in this venture of integration is for the individual to become “whole” and thus less disorientated and better able to manage being in the world.

The author makes the case that neither the client/patient nor the therapist needs integration, basing this on ideas drawn from philosophy and mathematics. He asks the question of what therapy might look like if the therapist refrained from applying the notion of integration. He suggests in its place there could be an acceptance of multiplicity, what the author calls being a *dividual* rather than an “individual” (*dividual* is italicised in one place but not in another – italicising it throughout might be helpful for the reader encountering this term for the first time).

It is essential to examine the comfortable, even beloved, ideas which have become accepted as truths in our field even if this process can be disorienting or challenging to our ego. I believe this paper is deeply valuable in bringing to our conscious awareness ideas “hiding in plain sight” which tend to go unexamined both in the therapy room and in academia.

In reading “Against Integration” I found myself writing “Bravo!” in the margins and underlying parts: “yes, brilliant” with three exclamation marks. However, as I have been asked to review it, I offer a few comments of reflection as well as my enthusiastic affirmation. I do not seek to comment on every part of this quite lengthy paper. I am not familiar with Mikhail Bakhtin and make no comment on some of the later sections.

Focussing on the introductory remarks, I noticed the author in parts adopts a somewhat strident, didactic voice – for example, likening therapists to “police”. It may well be this is required in order to make his point effectively. Perhaps a more restrained “both/and” tone would have too closely aligned with the idea of integration which the paper was seeking to challenge.

However, I wondered whether the valuable ideas in the paper may be more readily taken in by readers if the author had softened this in parts. Sometimes being flexible in conceding a smaller point may dismantle defences and allow a more radical idea to be heard. To that end, I wondered whether the author might have presented his case just as powerfully if

he had made room for some middle ground. (Or maybe not? Am I seeking integration myself here? Quite possibly!)

Would it have weakened his argument if instead of asserting that integration is “repressive”, if he had acknowledged that in therapy integration is not always necessary, is not always the “goal”, in that no “goal” of any kind is required. I suspect Lacanians already take this view and it is certainly been my experience in my own therapy where my therapist (“What is my modality?” *shrugs* “Myself?”) eschews notions of anyone needing to be “fixed”.

The author is spot on that in some cases integration may be repressive. However, alongside this view, I found myself asking whether we need a certain level of integration of our various parts before we are able to embrace our multiplicity.

By this I mean, whether it is not “policing” for a therapist to offer to a client/patient some version of “I see you” to their various unacknowledged parts without seeking to integrate or nullify them. They may in fact vindicate these parts and thus bring them from the unconscious to conscious awareness. The author seems to acknowledge this when he says “individualization is a crucial step in therapy”.

The author goes on to link therapeutic integration with the way in which refugees are forced to integrate in a society. Eliding the therapeutic jargon with the political/cultural idea of racial integration felt like a bit of a long bow to draw and I felt this part would have benefitted from some elaboration. Not wanting to be too dumbly literal, but could these be seen as different kinds of integration? Are there different types of integration? I also found myself wondering how this requirement for cultural or racial integration tallied with the doctrine of late capitalist neoliberal individualism which rejects collectivism, sees any form of dependency as shameful, and requires the construction of the self as a striving autonomous unit not entitled to support from the wider community. You can’t be both – or can you?

My practical note here is that I would have welcomed a brief definition distinguishing the various terms (Individuation, individualization, trans/individuation) and how they differ or converge with the Jungian concept of individuation, which is the kind of individuation with which many therapists or readers may be most familiar. An attempt to define integration would have been helpful.

Where I thought the author was on strongest ground was in the questioning of the conception of the “self”, and curiosity about the “locus of evaluation”. Rather than launching a vociferous attack on the notion of integration itself (a strawman?), this seemed to get closer to the underlying motivation for why we seek integration: the longing for the fixed, the resolved, to be made “whole” (what Robert Firestone called the Fantasy Bond) as opposed to confronting the existential threat of the inconclusive and conflicted, and “unfathomable”, to use the author’s word. This inclination seems to me to underlie both the therapist’s and the client/patients yearning for integration as a way to resolve our existential crisis and impose control on an unpredictable and threatening world. As TS Eliot said “ Humankind cannot bear very much reality”.

For me, this part of the paper captured vividly the tension between what might be thought of as the ego self and the transcendent self. It brought to mind the analogy often used by author Eckhart Tolle of the individual as both a wave on the ocean and the ocean itself simultaneously “individual” but inextricably part of the greater whole. Tolle also uses the terms “form identity” and “essence identity” or doing and being to distinguish between the smaller self and the infinite self,

and I wondered whether these terms might be useful as pointers to the types of selves the author was exploring here. I wondered if the author was saying that the tension between these selves cannot be resolved (or integrated?); that there cannot be consensus. Linking to the author's point about differentiation in mathematics, is the essential question not about integration per se, but about how we can hold a difference, both within ourselves and between ourselves and others?

As the author rightly points out, in the therapy room these questions are inextricably linked with the power dynamics between the therapist and the client/patient. "It is far cosier to take on a stance of specialised detachment when working with a client". The notion of cosiness (the second time he has used this word) captures the non-threatening position of being able to point the way, to "fix" someone, to believe there is an "answer" to be found, whether through integration or some other kind of resolution. In this way of seeing, the therapist is in control, or feels they are.

The author goes on to offer two clinical vignettes to illustrate his idea of *nomadic experiencing* as an alternative to integration. These were helpful but being the critical voice here, I find myself using words my own therapist has shared with me "Every method becomes a trap". I can tell the author is aware of this paradox, in his comments about resisting the gurus and dogmas of the trauma "industry". (Bravo!). However, I am not convinced that the bogeyman of "integration" needs to be replaced with some other nifty modality (I'm aware I'm using nifty here in a rather sneery manner, similar to the author's use of "cosy" and "woolly"). Perhaps any way of "solving" the conundrum of how to hold a difference, is in its own way erasing the difference. Messiness is always going to be a bit, well, messy.

I very much liked the author's description of Goldstein's ideas and am grateful to be introduced to them. However, I did wonder whether the paper lost a bit of cohesion in this section, going somewhat astray from the central notion of integration and reading a bit like an unedited stream of consciousness. (Ironically, it may benefit from *integration* with the broader argument of the paper!) That said, the point about Freud and Rogers (and all of us) foreclosing when finding ourself in "uncomfortable terrain" supported the author's earlier arguments against integration.

Overall, I found this a really stimulating and challenging piece of writing which offered some extremely valuable insights into the therapeutic alliance for both practitioners and scholars. I came away from it more certain than ever that we are not in therapy to be "fixed".

Thank you for asking me to review this and best wishes for your future work.