

Integrative Psychotherapy: the Synergy between Structure and Freedom

*An Essay Inspired by the Lecture and Workshop of John C. Norcross PhD.
Held in Prague on the 1st of October 2016*

The terms 'integration' and 'integrative' relate to the quality of an approach characterized as the combination of contradictory opinions and perspectives regarding its own substance, which however are not always clearly understood. These two terms give an impression of something so significant, that one has to either embrace it or reject it entirely. We are rarely willing to go to the root of the terms' meaning and look for the connections and contexts that they already offer within its own essence, when derived logically.

For the first time I came across this notion during my study of special pedagogy; integrating people with disabilities into the educational system and, by extension, into everyday life. Here, two opposing parties of the 'welcomers' and 'rebufferers' fought, with a surprising emotional and unsubstantial force, on the academic ground where one would expect an sophisticated insight; one claiming 'this' is right and good, because it is human, one stating 'this' is bad as it is not in the favour of the majority, it is uneconomical and unrealistic given current conditions.

Immensely similar division of opinions has been brought with the burning question of the mass migration of refugees from the East and South to Europe. As we know, they are here and need to be integrated, because they bring economic and cultural potential, because we are obliged to take care of them so that they can become additional untroubled components of the developing machinery. Alternatively, we have to ban them, not even consider integration as 'nobody knows what could happen' and how they could threaten our values, which is, by the way, another term used by many without understanding of what it may even mean.

I believe that such intensified attitude towards the concept of integration comes from the lack of understanding of what the process actually means and includes, or even from the unique complexity of the process, its entanglement, uncertain results, and long-term requirements for 'integrative' competence, which actually confuse the whole process itself. How exactly should we integrate to avoid chaos, confusion, and threats?

Integration is such a complicated process where the risk of failure appears to be so high that it actually triggers the above-described ambivalence itself. In a way, integration is such a great thing, such an experiment, that it may lead to unmanageable outcomes for us to regret. So this ambivalence and the common need to stay somewhere on the surface or to take a radical stance and thus satisfy one's need to be engaged in a clear manner without daring to go into the depth, or finding ways for implementing the concept of integration in a manner that is both beneficial and meaningful.

Well, integration is probably not going to be much fun: as it does not mean to accept everything that comes around and let it live its own life and hope that an invisible hand will step in to arrange a favourable result; as it does not mean to place diverse entities next to each other placing borders in between and allowing for the coexistence of distinct entities that compete with each other, do not cooperate and even contradict each other, while the whole aim of such an exercise has slipped away.

Integration can be imagined as a virtual laboratory, in which we grow cooperation and intuitive work of connecting different pieces of knowledge, experience, skills and strengths of integrated entities, while assuming that the integrated blend has the ability to immediately yet endlessly evaluate the overall effectiveness of every minor link and do so without any tools, templates based on previous similar experience since similarities hardly exist in such an extraordinary process. And furthermore to expect that such process can have the ability to playfully use creativity compensated with maximal responsibility, together with accurate intuition balanced by the highest level of knowledge that provides intuitive insights and precise feedback accompanied by gratitude. No wonder so many people rather choose to support the simple 'welcoming all' or 'refusing all' attitude. One must admit that effective integration is an immense task, not much simpler in the field of psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy is not always perceived as being scientific as it focuses on the treatment of the human soul, human suffering, failure, and pain - 'items' are not easily captured or measured as any other subjective and unmeasurable positive shifts resulting from its' own ascendancy. Thus, until recently, it was believed that it was easier and safer to hide behind the walls of dogmas taught by various schools of psychotherapy, which had formed their own theories, hypotheses, and techniques, often fundamentally different and even contradicting each other. Integrative Psychotherapy is taking on a difficult task: to connect varying approaches, methods, and techniques of specific psychotherapeutic systems and schools in order to achieve the best efficiency. And that is not all. There is still the potential of synergy: through integrating, evaluating, and intuitive merging of highest values, aiming to create a fusion of superior matter better than a simple sum of its' individual components. Nonetheless, this process is facing a 'scarecrow of chaos' on one side supported by a 'witch of fear' intimidating us by the possible split of the key elements from the overall context and on the other side by an 'evil fairy' frightening us by the existence of moving sands made of uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and rigid practices.

I have to confess that when I entered my first integrative psychotherapy training, I was wondering what kind of a mishmash is this, while at times facing verdicts like 'it is a great place to hide one's own amateurism and inability to understand a problem issue in depth' or even thinking 'finally will my own intuition and creativity make me being competent enough'.

One and a half year of training obviously helped me to master those naive expectations and early assumptions and slowly helped me to believe I had

chosen the right direction, thanks to which I may be able to effectively support my clients. Yet, this notion just slowly grew when gradually learning the principles of integration. Somehow, I had failed finding something to help me to internalize these principles and log them into my mental pictures (without showing disrespect for personal development aspects of my training that would probably be a part of any well-developed training anyway). Up to a certain moment, I had accepted being lost and decided to keep on soaking knowledge until the moment when I finally understand what to integrate with what and where. I encountered my very first breakthrough during a theoretical weekend when seemingly trivial information got stuck with me: 'if a patient has difficulty with emotions, use approach focusing on emotions. If they have difficulties manifesting in the realm of cognitive ideas, use approach focusing on cognitions....'. This was my very first insight. Everyone, including our clients, is evolving, changing their priorities, current life circumstances, and even issues holding them back. Therefore, the diagnosis and the suitable therapeutic approach are not written in a stone. Maybe it is the most present issues of each client that produces problems in their contact with themselves and the world. And so it becomes even more important to be tracking their unique needs as the fulfilment of these needs may eventually lead to needing no further support.

It is logical that the above-mentioned individual needs cannot only change but also will be changing and that they will be placed in some kind of a structure, a hierarchy. Other contexts, like those that are internal and external, such as relational, social, and cultural, will also play a role. Hence, there is no therapeutic school that will be the most effective at all parts of this spectrum. The integrative approach, however, enhances our chances for the right match.

It is a lovely idea: an idea that holds the above-described faith. Nevertheless, some doubts have begun to grow. So I ask: 'is that even in human power?', or to rather be concrete: 'is it in my own power? In the power of a man who perhaps has a high degree of intuitiveness and creativity, but falls into a chaos at times, with difficulties pushes through the finish line, and feels the weight of the missing of theoretical knowledge?'. Is integrative psychotherapy a mere VIP space opened only for those with a high level of charisma, insight, and experience, allowed through the door that most of us cannot even reach? If only there was a simple, understandable, and transparent system.

And here comes my encounter with Mr John Norcross. The moment of being in his presence, learning about his experience and his viewpoint.

At the very beginning, I have to deal with my expectations and adjust them. I have been looking forward to meeting a genius, a mysterious superhuman, whose every sentence would communicate the enormous discoveries from which we would be able to understand just small fractions but still feeling like facing the supernatural. Instead, there is 'such a normal American' waiting in front of the lecture hall, a guy that fits into our Central European preconceptions about this 'species' whom we would (if we had the power) just pronounce the next president of the United States of America. He is just a very friendly and

professional looking guy with American confidence and the right sense of humour.

He starts talking and I feel a disappointment. Is it possible that he is another rigid evidence-based scholar, whom we have so many of on the ground of Czech academia, presenting material that an average student has no chance to grasp a clear message from the shared mist of research facts? My initial verdict starts fainting away and I finally start listening, not waiting long for a nice surprise.

Science is not a religion and so it is not enough to hold a belief but have no proof. Norcross is uncompromising. Any claim, which he voices, is supported by real data, research-based. Slowly, he reveals the basic systems indicating the way in which to integrate psychotherapeutic approaches towards the needs of the client. Even if that is just a fragment of what he teaches in his four-hour presentation, still it is enough. There is no need to immediately fully understand the comprehensive system of integration, it is enough to realize that this system exists and is being developed even further.

From his lecture, I will always remember a graph showing the use of psychotherapeutic systems from the perspective of the phases of change. The very well-known stages of change, that were beaten into my head during a compulsory course teaching motivational interviewing, are now taking on a new dimension. Each stage is linked to powerful evidence-based therapeutic approaches from behavioural therapy to psychoanalysis. Hence, if we learn how to effectively assess the current stage of change regarding problem behaviour of each client, we will have a tool allowing us to 'speed it up' to the next stage. It tells us what approach to use to achieve the client's redirection towards the ideal outcome. Even if we do not know the application of all or most of the featured methods, we already can understand much better to what is likely to work for the client.

The one concept, that was given most time during the lecture but also during our previous offsite college week, was related to a simple and relatively short assessment of the client's treatment preferences (and particularly the therapeutic relationship) thanks to which we can easily learn what it is that our client expects from the therapeutic relationship and our approach during sessions. It is likely that during the course of therapy we find out a difference between what the client wants and what exactly it is that he/she needs. Not always are these two dimensions head to head. Sometimes, they even point us to the more suitable dynamics of client work, the change in his/her defences, his/her openness and the general development of his/her contracted goals. We do not need to be professional researchers to be able to find out the client's preferences and check them out from time to time. We can compare the results, we can draw them out, we can find discrepancies and interpret what the therapeutic process has been like for the client, we can see where his/her change has gone to share this with the client and use it to support further work. Maybe the client's uncertainty even shifts when he/she can better understand the therapeutic process and furthermore see that the helping professional aims to honestly understand her/him and her/his changes. Even if we only achieve the

last-mentioned point, it already has an impact on strengthening the therapeutic relationship. New topics can emerge from the unconscious, letting the client see his/her own development, demonstrating in clearly, which would not be possible otherwise.

In the context of the presentation showed by Mr Norcross, it became apparent, that a confident and elaborate system exists. One simple slide presented the effective methods of adapting psychotherapy to the individual client by creating a unique, original, and tailored approach based on the client's resistance level (if we are able to apply an effective and objective assessment of the client's current resistance level it can help us pinpoint what it is that the client needs professional assistance with), his/her already mentioned stages of change, coping styles (referring to how well can the client handle challenging situations), his/her cultural background, and his/her spirituality.

There is one idea even more interesting than the other. It is enough to just take a breath and start studying diligently.

Suddenly, it does not matter how much theoretical information and knowledge is still lying ahead of me. On the contrary, I am actually starting to look forward to discovering them. The huge mass of entangled data has actually changed its appearance; a system is becoming visible in the shapeless cloud of overwhelming theories and truths and this system is starting to sort out all the information, giving it more meaning.

Getting back to academic evidence and research findings: in the context of my growing need to understand how to integrate, they no longer seem as being intrusive. On the contrary, they give me reassurance and reinforce a sense of purpose. They show that well-developed integrative psychotherapy works. They give the best answers to all the dogmatists, claiming 'their' therapeutic school to be the only rightful. The integration of psychotherapy reaches into the future as it proves to be the most effective way forward. This conclusion triggers resentment and criticism of this approach as being chaotic. Yet, it is 'us' to have the evidence. If we know how to use and integrate the elements and strategies taught by individual schools in order to meet the clients' needs, adapt our therapeutic approach for them, create a unique and original path for each client - it logically must work better. And we have the confident proof, a security of well functioning know-how. If we still, however, miss a link somewhere in the system, we will look for it, examine it, and test it until we find it.

The, at the first glance relaxed, American gives my faith in integrative psychotherapy the most needed proof. The direction and helping rope, which I can always reach, when the complexity of human soul overwhelms me, and when I feel helplessness while looking for the right way to help an individual. At those times, there will be something for me to catch and find my way down into more familiar realms, where I can regain security.

Freedom belongs to my utmost values. But if it has no boundaries, it brings anxiety (I aimed to expressively describe this in the first part of this essay). Yet, if

there is a basic structure and a system, I can leave the heights of freedom at any time and find my ground in the given safety net without any hurt, but with another new experience, allowing me go back out there. Freedom, when protected by a structure, keeps on flourishing.

Integrative psychotherapy has begun to seem like the direction that may be just perfect for me. Its systemic approach is neither restraining nor dogmatic, rigidly following a path leading towards the loss of authenticity. Its structure actually provides safety and creates a frame within which we can work with our clients and paint a unique and original scene.

It is great to have confidence based on evidence and a well-formed system.

At the same time, it is uplifting to have creative freedom, based on intuition, creativity, and empathy understanding human uniqueness.

And the best of all is to have the two values linked together. I perceive the connection itself as being exclusively synergistic.

Integrative psychotherapy formulates an approach that is able to safely and creatively combine both of these values and create new entities. I am glad that I can witness it.

In Mladá Boleslav, Czech Republic

On the 6th of October 2016

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