

A Review of Neff & McMinn's "Embodying Integration..."

KeishaAnne Higley

Department of Counselor Education and Family Studies,

School of Behavioral Sciences, Liberty University

Abstract

Counselor training concerning integration often emphasizes integration theory and the shared history of theology and psychology, giving a large overview of combined psycho-spiritual understandings of pioneers in the effort. Included also is the felt antagonism from scientists or theologians (or both), an involved and in-depth study of the concept of knowing and how we know (epistemology), how worldviews influence knowing and hermeneutics, and finally, much time is spent discussing why integration is best. Megan Anna Neff, a doctorate student in clinical psychology and her father, Dr. Mark R. McMinn, professor of psychology and director of faith integration at George Fox University have co-authored a book about discussing spirituality and religion in the therapy room. Acknowledging the complexities of the context, the authors present Christian practitioners with a fresh look at integration in the postmodern world, one that encourages counselors to have the hard conversations, listen to their clients' perspectives, be in the present, experience the poignancy, precociousness, and preciousness of life. The first three chapters of their book are herein reviewed.

A Review of Neff & McMinn’s “Embodying Integration...”

Embodying integration, according to Megan Anna Neff and Mark McMinn (2020) combines the soul of therapist, which houses the spirit, and the body, which houses the soul, and teaches readers that Christians can practice integrated psychotherapy by *embodying integration*. For Neff and McMinn (2020) this means, at least in part, integration as conversation. Integration as conversation is a concept explained as including the complexities in integration which go beyond theory into practice, and into the hearts and minds of real people via questions and answers through the art of conversation, through the grace and patience of conversation, and what Neff and McMinn (2020) call the “authentic, hospitable, and generous conversation” (p. 13). With that theme in mind, their book is peppered throughout with “Integration Conversation Starters.”

Summary (Chapters 1-3)

“Lament: How Do We Make Sense of the Deep Aches in Life?”

Integrative Conversation: Concepts to Consider

Tidying the Struggle and The Relational Nature of Lament. Neff and McMinn (2020) use Old Testament prophet Jeremiah to reintroduce the *concept* of lamenting and to reteach the *value* of lamenting. Jeremiah lamented. It is quite literally what he was called to do as part of his witness for God. God’s people were a nation interrupted by raiding nations and God was allowing it. He meant for them to know why and Jeremiah was His vehicle. People today are raided by many things in their lives. The Psalms, like Jeremiah cry and rant and even rage as writers pour out their hearts before God (Neff & McMinn, 2020). Confronting fear, hurt, or pain is not meant to be easily undertaken; it is courageous to do so. We are meant to do so. To lament as the ancients, however, is to dig deeply into the ugly, weep because of it, struggle in it, fight it, hold it fast, until we have fought it out, and have either gotten to the other side of it, or at

minimum, have accepted that we can live with it, knowing it for what it is, whatever *it* is. Only a relationship full of grace and mercy offers this sort of freedom of expression.

The Costs. According to Neff and McMinn (2020) Augustine thought of earthly attachment as a sort of weakness and therefore the grieving over their loss as inappropriate. The human experience of lament was to be reserved for more revered matters of iniquity and disappointing God. Christians and psychology may sometimes also devalue or even criticize lamenting. However, such censure is not witnessed biblically, and the costs of not grieving is exorbitant. Relating to, attaching to, God's creation is both spiritual and organic to man. Loss is expensive, therefore, and meant to be felt. The wages for positive platitudes and "getting over it" through synthetic and disembodied living, are high (Neff & McMinn, 2020). Disembodied healing is not godly healing. Touching pain, naming it, facing it, and struggling with it, is godly. We grow in the process. We do not have to pretend things are perfect and we do not have to embrace living shallowly.

Therapeutic Implications

Attachment. Counselors must consider human attachment, the safe havens, and the bonding experiences of their clients. They must consider whole selves, holistic wellness concepts, all of our emotions, and create safe spaces in which clients can feel secure enough to lament (Neff & McMinn, 2020). At the same time, counselors must hold the possibility of hope. Life fully and simultaneously integrates the lament and the hope. Neff and McMinn (2020) note that research has shown emotional and physical health to interact strongly with one another. In embracing the full spectrum of authentic emotions, counselors can model healthy hope.

Depression and Grief. Painful experiences are not optional in life; they come to everyone. Have we become a people who seek to numb the pain, not feel it, not experience it?

Yet, is it healthy to numb emotions with various substances? Emotional numbness, according to Neff and McMinn (2020) numbs not only hurtful feelings, but good feelings as well. Counselors provide a context in which clients faithfully explore emotions (emotional expanding versus emotional constricting, pp.58-60). In second wave of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), a counselor hurried to “fix” the patient, which hurried the patient too, often leaving the hurt untouched. It is no small thing to sit with someone in their lament, to look beyond spiritual defenses and allow them to grieve, while intentionally observing the hope inherent in the lament.

“Uncertainty, Meaning, and Enjoyment: Does Anything Make Sense When the World is Such a Mess?”

Integrative Conversation: Concepts to Consider

Then and Now: Ecclesiastes and Hebel. Neff and McMinn (2020) argue that Qoheleth, the debated writer of *Ecclesiastes*, could have been writing about this age instead of his own: Economic instability, fleeting, fickle life, uncertainty. Chaos reigned then as now and there is nothing new under the sun. Life cannot be grasped and held onto. Paradox is found in that the more we try to hold life, the more we value our life, the less enjoyment will come from it. Qoheleth does not teach his readers that life is vain or meaningless, rather that it is unpredictable, brief, evanescent, transient. Life does not honor the definition of *just* as given to man by God, rather the justice of fallen man toward fallen man (often not *just* at all). So then, what does life offer man but to enjoy his labors and his neighbors, to eat, to drink, and to be merry of heart? As visual aid, Neff and McMinn (2020) borrow from an Old Testament professor’s use of a similarly fleeting puff of smoke from a cigar. The analogy is potent. A single puff of smoke is quickly diffused, to one direction or other, and even its aroma is soon gone.

Illusion of Control. Neff and McMinn (2020) observe that though research has yielded much empirical evidence concerning the benefits of spiritual connectivity and faith, religious and spiritual struggles, like any other struggle, can cause stress and problems with physical and mental well-being. Some types of seeking, searching, and striving do cause distress and can be or become part of the illusion of control. Man struggles to keep control instead of yielding it as *Ecclesiastes* advises. Everyone struggles: People of faith, those with no faith.

Locus of control is taught as debatable concept; nations and people strive within themselves and with others. Neff and McMinn (2020) write about striving for belonging within a political, socioeconomic, cultural and/or religious context. Qoheleth laments that “the righteous get what the wicked deserve and vice versa” (p. 85). This disillusionment hits the idealist hard, strikes a mighty blow to the romantic, hurts everyone who wants to believe in justice and fairness. This is the difficulty of disillusionment. Man is not in control, and that is a truth that brings both hurt and hope.

Therapeutic Implications

Deep Empathy. Qoheleth’s wisdom, writes Neff and McMinn (2020), is born of chaos, uncertainty, and disillusionment. *Hebel* in the therapy room means that counselors and clients, each living their own unpredictable lives, wisely come together in an integrated space in time to be present. Deep empathy, the empathy of presence, is sitting with someone in their *hebel*, just being with one another amongst the chaos, and accepting it. According to Neff and McMinn (2020) this is an underlying assumption of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

Valuing the present is part of a deep empathy, part of becoming embodied to our lives in our days and our times. Neff and McMinn (2020) present a number of questions. In counseling we orient to our client’s location in time and where their problem is located in time. Are they

experiencing their life? How fast is their life? Are we, counselors, able to enter our patient's meaning-making and meaning-making systems? Can we see cracks in our client's meaning-making? Being in the present moment with the client gives voice to integrative conversation and to deep empathy.

The Gift and the Gratitude. The concepts of singing in the rain, dancing in the wind, and praising God in the storm all give answer to the question of how God wants us to respond to *hebel*. That is that we recognize the storm, praise God in the midst of it, are grateful for the chance to face it, and believe in the growth it will bring. Life is chaotic and uncertain, but it is a precious gift. It is one thing for a gift to be given, another for it to be received, and quite another altogether for it to be received with gratitude. According to Neff and McMinn (2020), this biblical concept has been researched and scientifically shown to bear much positive fruit. Sometimes we do not want to sing in the rain, we just hurt. The lament is good, holding it is good, but gratitude is a great medicine and an excellent healer.

“Imaging God: What Does My View of God Have to Do with My Work as a Counselor or Psychotherapist?”

Integrative Conversation: Concepts to Consider

Imago Dei versus Making God. Neff and McMinn (2020) discuss that in Christian understanding, God did not create man from death, but from life—His life, and man was made in His image (*imago Dei*). God did not take, He gave. He did not require sacrifice, He gave it. Human life was designed, not from need, rather from love. With love came choice: The choice to reciprocate love and faithfulness (or not); the choice to lean on God for fundamental knowledge and understanding while we live in, explore, and enjoy the world in which He created us. Yet, He also created us with a wonderful ability to relate, to respond and to adapt. Neff and

McMinn (2020) explain that we do this from our experiences in our environment, gaining both explicit (known) knowledge and implicit (unknown) knowledge. Things we think about are known thoughts, those we do not have been referred to as “unthought knowns” (p. 119).

Sometimes in relating, in behaving *explicitly*, we project things we have come to believe *implicitly*. We do this with our image of God as well. We imagine Him. Though we may gain knowledge of God from being taught, from reading His Word, writing, etc., we also imagine Him from our experiences. Our experiences are projected onto God and this is who we imagine God to be.

The Explicit Influences the Implicit; the Implicit Influences the Explicit. What we believe, our ideas, our imaginings, are fundamentally shaped by our experiences (Neff & McMinn, 2020). A gap is created between our explicit beliefs and our implicit beliefs. For Neff and McMinn (2020), this is the gap between our concept of God and our *image* of God, between God creating us and our creating God. We yearn to relate, we yearn to fill the emptiness inside, and this is the context of counseling. Neff & McMinn (2020) write that the God-given call to relate has been shown also through research in the Physiological sciences. The search for meaning and direction is universal. Therapists enter into this, coming alongside lost and stumbling persons, blocked and abused persons, with their own degree of lostness. The therapeutic relationship lies in both of their paths, and the search for direction is real.

Therapeutic Implications

Goodness and Unconditional Positive Regard. An individual’s theological anthropology is their “view of humanity in relation to God” (Neff & McMinn, 2020, p. 123). Neff and McMinn believe that a “theologically grounded view of persons is that humanity is fundamentally good, if not entirely good” (p. 123). A counselor’s job is to reflect God’s

goodness, holding the hope of *imago Dei* in clients. Carl Rogers' unconditional positive regard is intended to impart a similar sort of dignity (Neff & McMinn, 2020). When counselors see clients as God sees them, worthy of work, of sacrifice, of predetermined value, of love, human and limited, alive, and part of the whole of humanity, then we reflect the theological anthropology of *imago Dei*. We are all a part of the whole of God's creation. Grace is therefore fundamental to all we do.

The Self and Relating. Neff and McMinn (2020) write that our theological anthropology informs our view both of self and of others. Our view is informed also by scientific anthropology and philosophical anthropology, the paradigms for which shift with the zeitgeist of the era. For example, the shift from the pre-modern porous self to the modern idea of the buffered (self-contained and bounded) self, and now the challenge to the notion of the buffered self. Neff and McMinn (2020) circle back to neuroscience and behavioral sciences to relate the power of relating and therefore relationships on the anatomy of our brain. However, they are cautious in pointing out that humans still have a large degree of personal agency and thereby personal responsibility. As attachment theory and theology, neuroscience and chemistry all have shown, relating is important, so important as to drive both our experiences and how we "experience" them.

Reflection

The Neff and McMinn (2020) text is not meant to be read quickly. There is simply far too much to chew on. Time is needed to process, and one dare not simply lie down after consuming large portions lest regurgitation is the aim instead of digestion. A reader is not necessarily the wiser or the better for having read this book, and to this reader it failed to live up to the hype of recommendations, but it is not a terrible read. In chapters 1-3 of Neff and

McMinn's *Embodying Integration*, this reader was reminded repeatedly that God created us for relationship, hurt happens, often unexpectedly (*hebel*), that we can and should lament because we have a position of grace, and that John Donne was right: No man is an island (Donne, 1623). When we hurt, we hurt others, others hurt us, we all suffer the loss of humanity and goodness, and we—each of us—are the ones for whom the bell tolls. Human attachment theory and relational neurobiology both have shown the truth of human need to securely bond and to authentically relate (Hennessy et al., 2015; Kalat, 2019). However, anything (or anyone) that replaces God in our meaning systems, in our life focus, in our affection, is idolatry (Hawkins & Clinton, 2015). The balance in God, others, self, hearkens back to an old Sunday school acronym: JOY (Jesus, Others, You).

Embodying Integration (Neff & McMinn, 2020) is a decidedly unoriginal approach styling itself as original, which exposes readers to a contemporary view of theology, to Scripture, and to how each relate to counseling. Views are by nature more opinion than fact. A “conversation” takes place which only works because it is between father and daughter, not because it is between practicing therapists. So then, how does the book really help? I both agree and disagree with the authors. Neff hurts the spiritual depth with questions and answers that are not answers, only *her* answers to *her* questions, as if prompted to journal *her* spiritual formation.

The authors make a statement in their introduction which better fits my idea of counseling: “Forming wisdom more than resolving issues” (p. 15). Neff and McMinn (2020) use the statement to describe the types of conversation they are promoting, but such also is not original, it is an approach which borrows from the best of the teachings of God, of Christ, of Billy Graham, of deep thinkers such as Eric Johnson or David Entwistle (2015), of Ed Hindson (2016), of Richard Hawkins (Hawkins & Clinton, 2015) Tim Clinton, and George Ohlschlager

(2002), or Stanton Jones (2011), of the secularist (Feist, Feist, & Roberts, 2013; Murdock, 2017), and the theologian (Hindson, 2016), the psychologists and the Christian (Jones & Butman, 2011). In counseling this statement means equipping clients with the sort of resilient minds and hearts that open to receive and expand to give. It means helping them develop eyes that see and ears that hear, so they can, in their own context, recognize when they are lost and know what to do.

Spiritual Formation

While I have argued with the authors and agreed with the authors, which may itself yet yield a net positive result, I can honestly say this work has done nothing to help nor hinder my spiritual formation as a concept defined in lectures on integration (see for example, Liberty University Department of Counselor Education and Family Studies, 2021). It should be noted that I prefer the term *sanctification*, and the overlap in meaning seems too wide, even if *spiritual formation* is likely more academically acceptable. Spirit and structural form do not compute for me in the way course material, and very intelligent model-creating people, would dictate (Liberty University Department of Counselor Education and Family Studies, 2021). In fact, the phrase *spiritual formation* seems somewhat of an oxymoron. Does spirituality have form? Should we really block it in by *formalizing* it? My spirit is formed, the Holy Spirit in me is formed. It is my soul, then, that is in the way—me—my will as the Bible defines it, as Neff and McMinn (2020) and many others (secular and spiritual) have explained it (see for example Hawkins & Clinton, 2015). Why concretize the abstract or attempt to encompass what cannot be contained? Explanations do help, I agree, but often we simply go too far.

In reading these chapters, I have not become more (or less) like Jesus and find the prompt...ill matched to the chapters assigned. They simply do not have the sort of heart to them

which promotes Christlikeness. Neff, in particular, writes far more from the intellect than from the heart. This reader is not opposed to intellectual discourse, the text simply fails to touch the heart (the soul, the seat of my will). Neither do Neff and McMinn (2020) alter my impressions as they discuss in their conversation about the differences in explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge. Much of what they write is already known. Putting it together is not new either, merely timely, and perhaps useful for such contemporary courses as this. After all, people are busy and if the proverbial blanks are not filled herein, they may well be filled-in elsewhere.

Lamenting is indeed biblical as discussed, and is psychological (as discussed), but it is not Neff and McMinn (2020) who should receive credit for this but the many other unnamed pastors and laypeople, who really have been saying it all along. This reader has never not known it for certain. What is wrong with we modern people that we cannot recognize what already is? Why do we keep writing and writing and writing? Coming alongside people in pain and just being with them in the moment is as old as the oldest stories, songs, and poems (Job, for instance, David's songs, and poems from writers such as Dante and Shakespeare, and of course, Jesus' Good Samaritan). Old dirges tell stories of such moments. Perhaps where Neff and McMinn (2020) are most valuable is in stating it now, in these times, in this context, but I was especially moved by Beverly Hislop's (2010) version, but perhaps that is considered old. Why is old knowledge unusable knowledge nowadays? For this reader, the older the truth, the more precious its worth.

I have known much of grief in my life, much of Qoheleth's *hebel*, and it is fair to say that there is no one way to suffer from the sort of pain one feels from constant trauma, a single traumatic event, or loss. It is human to grieve a life interrupted (our own and that of others). Humans do want to relate though—relate their joy, relate their pain, give relationship, and

receive it in return. Discussing this one day, my mother asked whether people so unlike can possibly find help in each other, good counsel. Yet she understands better than most, the value of presence. It is her nature to withdraw when she hurts, to wish to be left alone. She has “kicked” me out more times than I can count as she has grieved the loss of my brother, but God sent me back every time (seventy times seven times seventy times seven). Though happily married, I know another role for me is Jonathan to her David (1 Samuel 18:3 for example), for she, as fierce a warrior as she may be, has known so much unsettled pain in her life and I in mine. God has given us to relate to one another and to understand, to give “presence” to one another. Our God and Savior notwithstanding, who else could possibly understand? A counselor’s job is to develop eyes that see and ears that hear (sanctification or spiritual formation?), and to meet people where they are—as Jesus exemplified.

As a final point of discrepancy, Neff and McMinn (2020) state that humans are fundamentally good, citing the Creation account from Genesis, acknowledging our fallen nature, but concluding that God is “delighted with us” (p. 123). This is an arguable position. God undoubtedly loves us, but His delight in post-creation events (i.e., time since the Fall), is at least questionable (e.g., the account of Noah and The Great Deluge, Genesis 6-9, and the proclamations of God through Isaiah, Jeremiah, through His Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and through the apostle Paul). If God defines *goodness*, we none are good, no not one (see, for example Psalm 14:3; 53:1-3; Isaiah 57:1; Jeremiah 4:22; Matthew 19:17; Romans 3:12). It is true, that God loves every one of us anyway, that His creation was and is a good one, that He has chosen us and wants all of us to choose Him, to delight in Him and in His way (see Psm.1:2; 37:4; Rom. 7:22). We are commanded to do good works (Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 2:10), but we are *not* good, we have gone astray (Isa. 55). Though, God wants us to do good in Christ

name, with help from His Holy Spirit, we, in our natural selves, are not good; we are unfaithful and idolatrous.

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