

# “That moment of wrestling” - Capturing therapists descriptions of the process of integration. An IPA study looking at therapists who are Christians experience of integration personally and professionally.

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Ethical Approval from IICP College, Dublin.

## Aims and Objectives

Aim : To gain an understanding of how Christians who are therapists' integrate their spiritual and professional lives, and how this related to their experience of integrating approaches to therapy.

Objectives:

- 1) To observe Religious/Spiritual therapists experience of integration personally and professionally.
- 2) To uncover if there is a commonality between how therapists approach the integration of their spirituality and their therapy, and how they approach the integration of approaches to therapy.



## Literature Review

**Systematic literature review.** 34 religious/spirituality studies and 78 integration/personal style papers identified. Included N= 16.

Theme 1: Managing the tension of benefits & drawbacks.

Theme 2 : Integrative ways.

From the literature reviewed, it can be said that therapists have a personal style. Personal ways of relating correlate with the therapeutic orientation therapists use and personal epistemic style (Constructivist v Rationalistic) shows up in the work reflecting those therapists that are more and less likely to be integrative. Additionally Integrative therapists have been found to be more likely to identify as religious/spiritual. The personal qualities and values of therapists, bring benefits and drawbacks and tensions and motivations that the therapist is required to balance (Bernhardt et al. 2018; Osteen, 2018). Religiosity/Spirituality for example can introduce distance between client and therapist, triggering of

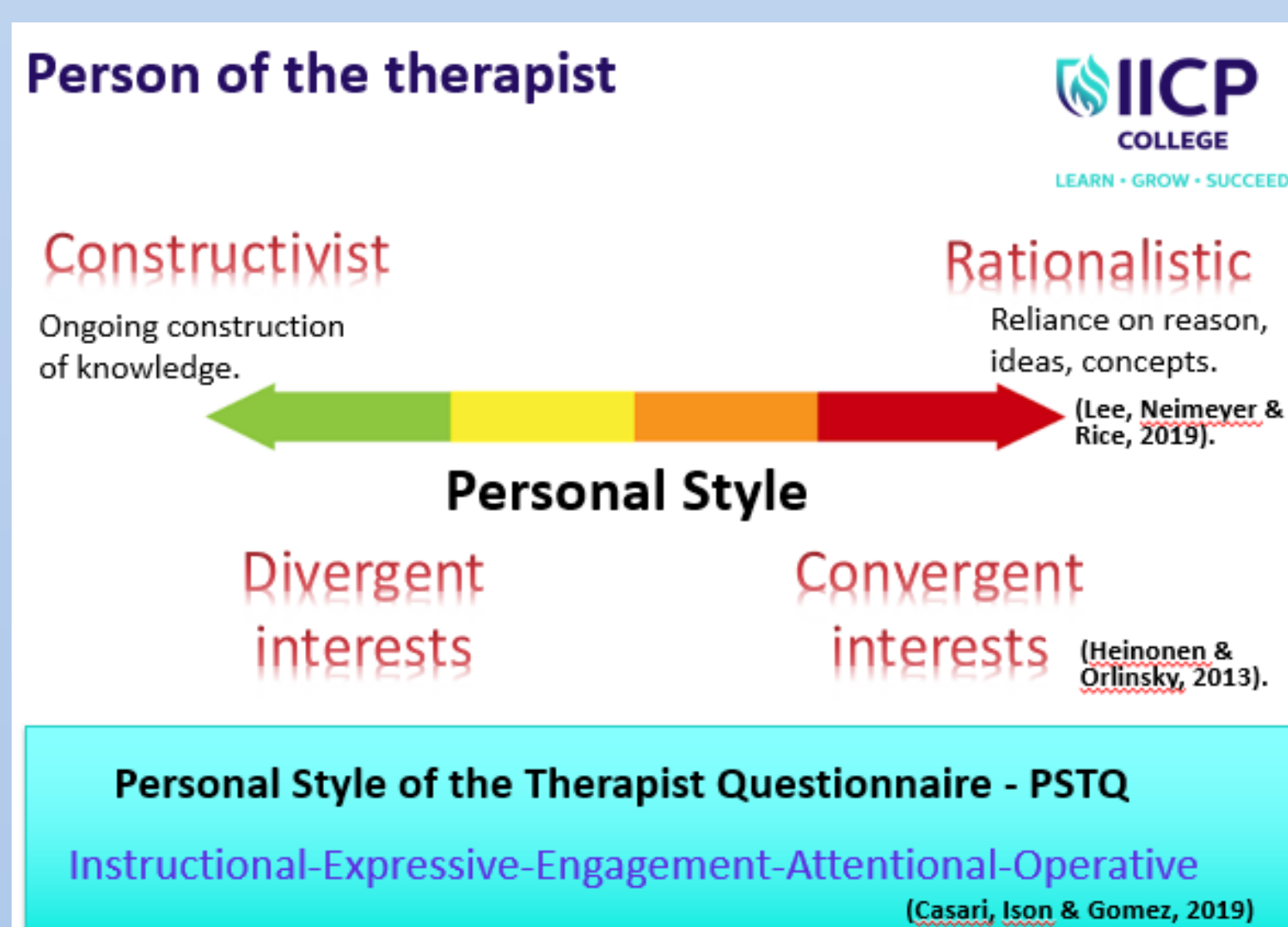


Fig 1. Diagram representing the person of the therapist literature.

negative past experience, while also encouraging reflexivity and providing a source of self-care. Even when personal and therapist values align, challenge is associated with applying personal

values to therapeutic practice (Thompson & Cooper, 2012). While there is some literature on personal approaches to therapy integration identifying the therapist as the integrating device (O'Hara & Schofield, 2008), a deeper exploration is required to further explore therapists' personal traits, qualities and life history, and the interplay with their work (Bernhardt, et al., 2018).

## Research Methodology

This study has sought to take a phenomenological approach to capture therapists experience of integration by observing therapists response to the integrative challenge professionally in the light of their response to the integrative challenge personally.

**Design.** Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis West (2009) states that due to the subjective nature of both spirituality and therapy, IPA is the most appropriate method for studies involving both spirituality and therapy.

**Participants and Sampling.** Six experienced professionally registered therapists (minimum of 2 years in practice) who identify as Christian were participated in a semi structured interview.

**Data Analysis.** Detailed analysis aided the identification of similarities and differences in what participants said and in deeper meanings that were observed (Smith, 2007).

## Findings

**Superordinate Theme 1) Therapy and spirituality wrestle.**



This has three subthemes.

- 1a) The pre-eminence of spirituality.
- 1b) The challenge brought by spirituality.
- 1c) The two selves of the therapist.

Therapy and spirituality wrestle captures the tension brought by carrying the separate world views that therapy and spirituality represent, the benefits and drawbacks of each, and their impact on each other. It captures how and when each world view cuts across the other, as participants maximise meeting the needs of the therapeutic commitment, whilst as far as possible, remaining faithful to the therapists spirituality.

“God understands how we’re put together in a way Psychology is only just beginning to explore.”

“My heart was palpitating... she was heading to London tomorrow to have an abortion.”

“When I am aware of how its affecting me, they cannot know that position because it would appear judgemental”.

**Superordinate Theme 2) Therapists response to the integrative challenge as reflections of personal characteristics from within themselves.**

Similarities emerged from the six participants interviews between how they responded to the challenge of integrating their spirituality with their practice alongside how they approached the integration of different approaches to therapy. When answering what supported their way of integrating different approaches to therapy, participants provided vignettes from their personal lives as illustrations.

“(Integration) fits because of the different complexities within myself”.



Fig 2. Diagrams representing participant personal characteristics/influences and resulting personal integrative themes that show up in their work.

## Research Limitations

Limitations in this study exist in relation to

- ✓ Sample size. 6 participants only.
- ✓ Securing participants with no prior knowledge of the researcher.
- ✓ Novice researcher, researching an area of personal interest.
- ✓ Use of a homogenous sample reducing applicability of findings.
- ✓ Accurately representing that which is partially stated, partially implied, partially interpreted, and ultimately inconclusive.

**Reflexivity.** Use of a reflexive journal revealed that alongside the benefits of researcher insider status, there were inherent limitation of a Christian researcher, looking at what Christian therapists' do well. IPA according to Heidegger is not done without pre-suppositions (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). The researcher was conflicted in looking at spirituality while unconsciously avoiding spirituality for fear of appearing biased.



Fig 3. Image recorded in journal entry highlighting researchers sense of the impossibility in managing bias.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This research captures;

- o Christian therapists wrestle with difference;
  - Different personal/professional worldviews.
  - Different approaches to therapy.

AND

- o Their unique way of integrating (or integrative style), resulting from;
  - Personal traits.
  - Personal qualities.
  - Life history.

The research study suggests that integrative therapist training should include enabling trainees to identify their personal integrative style. This may support decision making around what to integrate and may help to manage the challenge that religious/spiritual therapists experience from dealing with differing ideas and worldview's.

**Diversity, Equality and Inclusion:** The study also suggests that Christian therapists withhold parts of themselves (e.g. personal worldviews/beliefs and challenge experienced) in the therapy room, with colleagues/professional communities and accrediting bodies. Future psychotherapy training would benefit from greater inclusion and integration of individuality to support Christian therapists wrestle with personal and professional integration.

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