A New Wave of Thinking in Psychology

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There is a new wave of thinking cresting in the discipline of psychology. Put simply, it is termed "relationality" or "strong relationality," but in philosophy and social theory it goes by the name "ontological hermeneutics." Whatever the label, there is a growing appreciation for how fundamental it is to human experience, the way the world works, and practical life and living. Unfortunately, many psychologists will not recognize or understand this new wave. Its rival conception, "abstractionism" or "ontological abstractionism," has dominated psychology for over a century and will not go away quietly. Indeed, when psychologists have sensed the need for strong relationality in their profession or research, abstractionism has spawned faux relational conceptions that never satisfy but seem like the best we can do.

The purpose of this chapter is thus twofold. First, it is imperative that psychologists get a grip on the limits of abstractionism and the harm it is currently doing the discipline. There is no question it has served psychology well in many respects, but its hidden dominance has led to many overlooked problems. As we will see, too many conceptual blind spots, intellectual dead ends, self-defeating patterns of living, and even relationship conflicts owe their existence to this relatively unrecognized conception. The second purpose of this chapter is to clarify the new wave. Clarification is necessary because those who feel they understand strong relationality frequently do not. Too often what passes for relationality contains abstractionist assumptions. Though not bad in themselves, these faux relational conceptions can rob psychology of genuinely new ideas and make it appear as if the new wave has already occurred.

We begin the chapter by introducing the new wave and its more influential rival. However, these two ontologies rarely appear in their pure forms in practice, so we first describe important challenges in differentiating them as well as appreciating the relational wave. The bulk of the chapter, then, explains important distinctions between the two. These comparisons attempt to describe some of the hidden influences of abstractionism in psychology and Western culture in order to clear a conceptual space for relationality. To do so, we divide the abstractionist framework into overlapping characteristics and then contrast each characteristic with its relational alternative, including where this alternative is developed more fully in psychology's theoretical community.

Hidden Ontological Challenges

We use the term "ontological" somewhat loosely to mean assumptions about what is most real or fundamental in the world. In this sense, the main distinction between these two ontologies can be introduced in a deceptively simple way (though, as we will see, there are many complex nuances). *Ontological abstractionism*[i] assumes that the objects and events of the world are most real or fundamental when they are understood as abstracted or separated from their contexts (e.g., the laboratory tradition), while *ontological relationality* (or ontological hermeneutics) assumes that the objects and events of the world are most real or fundamental when they are understood as having an inextricable relationship with particular contexts.

A simple hammer, for example, is best understood from an abstractionist perspective in terms of itself (e.g., its shape, weight, etc.). No reference to its social or historical context is considered necessary. Indeed, the hammer is thought to be essentially the same, regardless of its context. The relationist, by contrast, assumes that reference to context is required for even a basic understanding of the hammer, because its identity can change from context to context—a nail-pounder in one situation, a paperweight in the next. The shape of the hammer, for instance, is crucial for the first context but not for the second. These two ontologies are as ancient as the ideas of Parmenides and Heraclitus, and currently reside in psychology in their modern rationalist and hermeneutic forms (Slife, 2004).

As mentioned, however, their conceptual differences are challenging to distinguish in practice. Indeed, we would hold that even their concepts or meanings are intimately related to one another. We realize that an intimacy relation usually implies characteristics in common to the Western mind, but here we mean *intimacy of differences* almost exclusively, as we will later explain. The point here is that this intimacy facilitates the two ontologies appearing together in all sorts of practical guises and mixtures. Perhaps most problematic in this regard is how often they are mistaken for one another. For example, many psychologists view themselves as relationists because they value relationships in their therapy and/or take contexts into account in their research. Yet, with the comparisons we offer below, we hope to show that this relationality is often a weak or even a faux relationality, because psychologists often value relationships and take contexts into account in an abstractionist manner, with abstractionist assumptions (Slife & Wiggins, 2009).

The comparisons we offer, then, are intended to clarify these issues. Too often, the confusion between these fundamental assumptions has been abstractionism's gain. With abstractionism favored by the powerful in the discipline (e.g., journal editors, grant reviewers), ostensibly relational ideas and practices have frequently been covered over with abstractionist assumptions. In this sense, the soil of ontological relationality has rarely been allowed to fertilize and facilitate disciplinary fruit.

This is not to say that important relational sprouts have not already occurred in the history of psychology. Indeed, the work of Kurt Lewin (2013), Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (1968), and Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), among others, have already led to considerable contemporary fruit through relational feminism (e.g., Schwartzman, 2006), relational psychoanalysis (e.g, Mitchell & Aron, 1999), systems theory (e.g., Broderick, 1993), and social ecology (e.g., Garbarino, 1999), to name just a few. However, even these conceptual seedlings have not always taken advantage of relationality's *fully* fertile grounding. It is our hope that the distinctions we offer here will provide not only a better knowledge of relationality's potential for psychology but also a better understanding of abstractionism's conceptual tentacles in nearly all aspects of psychology's enterprise.

Ontological Distinctions

With this brief introduction, we move now to understand the two ontologies in greater depth and illustration by making pivotal conceptual and practical distinctions. As we do, we attempt to note important new wave or relational work that is ongoing in the theoretical community of

psychology. Indeed, the unity of this work has been relatively overlooked, so one of the purposes of this chapter is to bring greater connectivity and coherence to this new wave of scholarship. It is also hoped that a more connected community of strong relationists will bring greater recognition from the larger body of psychological researchers and practitioners, furthering important innovation and application.

Five overlapping characteristics of abstractionism are presented—separability, similarity, simplicity, idealization, and top-down—along with differentiating characteristics of relationality. It perhaps goes without saying that these characteristics are themselves abstractions. Even our mode of conveying these characteristics, language, is often considered inherently reductive and abstractive (Jones, 2017). Nevertheless, our use of such conventional modes of communication is not an implicit endorsement of abstractionism. The relationist would merely note that such words and characteristics are not the most real and fundamental realities of the world; they are merely descriptions of what is real. The real are the concrete and particular relationships themselves. Indeed, the fact that this abstractive mode is "conventional" is simply another sign of the dominance of abstractionism in our academic culture, a dominance this paper accedes to in making these comparisons.

Comparison 1: Separability

Abstractionism. As mentioned, the most general way to understand the abstractionist position is that things are best understood apart from their contexts. One of the most obvious implications of this position is the laboratory tradition, where the objects of science are thought to be better studied when divorced from their natural contexts. However, this position and tradition also assume a more specific characteristic of abstractionism: separability. For objects of study to be meaningfully detached from their natural contexts, we have to assume they *can* be separated in this fashion—that the object of study retains its basic qualities when divorced from the context in which it appears. This assumption of separability is so fundamental to Western culture that Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001) contend that Western thought itself can be defined with this characteristic: "the detachment of the object from its context" (p. 293).

This characteristic is also seen in the individualism of the West, where persons are thought to be best understood as if their selves are only related secondarily to whatever context they might be part of at the time. The personality theory tradition of psychology (e.g., Freud, Rogers, Skinner) is closely related, because persons are viewed as if their personalities are contained within the boundaries of their skin (e.g., ego, self, reinforcement history). With this separability characteristic, the fundamental units of community are individual persons who are not only separated from each other but also from the community as a whole. The individual, in this sense, does not bow to the morality of the community; the individual has ultimate moral sovereignty and autonomy, which is part of the reason personal "freedom from," a kind of separateness itself, is often championed (Slife, O'Grady, & Kosits, 2017). People should be protected from the morality of others and moral traditions of the past. Indeed, communities such as governments and marriages are viewed primarily as instruments of the individual—to facilitate their autonomy and happiness.

This characteristic of separability does not just apply to people. Another crucial part of the Western tradition is its dualisms—its assumption that ideas such mind and body, fact and value, and subjectivity and objectivity can be independent of one another. We are aware that some would contend that neuroscience has wholly discredited the separability of the mind and body (Slife, Reber, & Faulconer, 2012), but many psychological researchers still presume the separability of fact and value, subjectivity and objectivity. Indeed, any review of psychological texts on method shows that one of the most important goals of psychological research is objectivity, where the researcher's subjective biases, assumptions, and values are thought to be separable from the objective and pristine state of nature. Consider the method text from Schweigert (2011) as an example: "Scientists look for independent evidence of their claim: objective evidence that does not depend on the scientist's theory or personal viewpoint" (p. 2).

Relationality. Ontological or strong relationality, by contrast, postulates relationship or "betweenness" as the most real or fundamental. From this perspective, contexts and things are not ultimately separable. The real is less like a self-contained object, which requires the elimination of "extraneous variables" to fully comprehend it, and more like a textual meaning, which requires its relation to context (e.g., environment, body, past, culture) to understand it fundamentally. The relational tradition, for this reason, would have predicted the culmination of the lab tradition where "ecological validity" was eventually required. This does not mean that lab findings are irrelevant to the relationist; it just means that the context *of the lab itself* needs to be taken into account to truly and fully understand laboratory findings. The reason, from the viewpoint of the relationist, is that the context of the lab, as with all contexts, materially contributes to the findings.

Persons and their contexts are similarly thought to mutually constitute one another. This shared being does not necessarily mean that persons "interact" with their environments, because many types of interactions can assume the persons or things interacting are ontologically separable in the first place. Instead, a person's very identity or personality is considered inseparable with the person's culture and environment. Billy, for example, is the "smart one" in his high school, at least until he goes away to an Ivy League university, where other "smart ones" lead him to a different identity. Because individuals are inextricably part of, rather than apart from, their cultures and communities, the moral traditions and current values of these communities are part of their moral being, sometimes in spite of individual decisions to the contrary. From this relational perspective, important individualist ideas such as individual autonomy are themselves cultural ideas, not facts, as is often asserted.

Dualism too is challenged in a relational ontology. A relational framework would have long ago predicted the downfall of the separability of mind and body, but it also predicts the eventual failure of other dualisms, such as facts and values or subjectivity and objectivity in psychological research. Subjective values, for example, are and always will be present in psychological studies in the sense of researcher choice points for formulating and conducting studies—choice of topic, research design, operationalization, hypotheses to test, statistical analyses, and data interpretation, to name just a few. And these subjective factors say nothing about the many undisclosed assumptions made about topics considered important as well as method and statistical assumptions. Instead of attempting to hide these "subjective" choice points and

assumptions—however well-accepted they may be—the relationist would advocate taking them into account when understanding research as well as examining alternative assumptions.

Theoretical Community. Many members of the theoretical community in psychology have developed these relational challenges to the abstractionist characteristic of separability, though these ontological meanings and labels are rarely used. For example, Sugarman (2015) and Wachtel (2017) have critiqued the radical individualism of contemporary Western culture. They have argued that this sort of understanding is both unwise and harmful compared to more relational understandings where people are seen, ontologically, as "deeply dependent on social relatedness and . . . participation in culture" (Fowers, 2005, p. 93; Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017; Richardson, Bishop, & Garcia-Joslin, 2018). Clegg and Moissinac (2005) even advocate a concept of consciousness that rejects the fragmented, dualistic norm in favor of a relational concept of consciousness that views individuals as holistic, integrated wholes. Others, such as Freeman (2015) and Teo (2008), have questioned the dualistic veracity of the "separation of 'is' and 'ought,'" (Teo, 2008, p. 47) and between subject and object (Freeman, 2015; Frie, 2015; Slife, Reber, & Faulconer, 2012). Similarly, Alan Tjeltveit (1999; 2006) and Stephen Yanchar (Yanchar, 2018; Yanchar & Slife, 2017; Yanchar, Slife, & Warne, 2008) have long pointed to the integral nature of values and the "subjective" in the "objective" enterprise of psychology. Joe Gone (2012) also provides an important example of a relational approach to clinical practice with his notion of indigenous knowledge in the treatment of substance abuse disorders in American Indians and Alaskan Natives.

These articles and books are just a small sample from the larger theoretical literature, but they should exemplify how some theorists are consciously and perhaps unconsciously challenging the abstractionist feature of separability and appearing to move toward a more strongly relational understanding of psychological phenomena.

Comparison 2: Similarity

Abstractionism. When the abstracted is the most real, it follows that the human capacity to create abstract*ions* should be celebrated, which is part of the tradition of Western philosophy (Whitehead, 1969).[ii] Indeed, one of the parents of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes, is renowned for contending that our capacity to abstract is the basis of our identities. His "cogito ergo sum" could just as easily be interpreted as "I abstract, therefore I am," with abstractions viewed as the highest form of thinking. As a case in point, consider the attraction of scientists to the lawfulness of the world. It may be surprising to think of natural laws as abstractions, especially physical laws, but these laws are never really observed. We can, for instance, observe our footprints in the sand or our weight on the scale, but we never observe the law of gravity. Natural laws are inferred (abstracted), not observed. Yet, seemingly contrary to their loyalty to systematic observation in modern science, many natural scientists consider these abstractions the ultimate reality (because of their ontology).

The importance of abstractions also extends to our Western forms of conception and ideas. To form conventional conceptions in the West, it is often assumed they occur "by abstracting out what is common to a variety of instances" (Blackburn, 2005, p. 3). In other words, we must look exclusively at *relations of similarity*. To form a conception of cumquats, we attend to

similarities among the particulars of the fruit, while de-emphasizing their differences. Isaac Newton, as another example, undoubtedly downplayed the differences among his practical measurements of motion to formulate his laws of motion. In fact, it was Euler who later realized that Newton's laws were applied to objects which were idealized or abstracted as single point masses, minimizing the differences in the deformability and rigidity of real bodies in motion (Becchi, Corradi, Foce, & Pedemonte, 2012). This downplaying of differences also helps us to understand psychology's classical penchant for postulating abstract and universal theories, such as the personality tradition of Freud, Rogers, and Skinner. Differing contexts cannot matter for these types of abstractions to be the highest forms of knowledge.

This abstractionist emphasis on similarity also extends more broadly to human relationships in our Western culture, as evidenced by the websites eharmony.com and match.com. When people are dating, it is not unusual for them to be concerned about their "compatibility," which they typically take to mean similarity of values, styles, and personalities. Likewise, they frequently view differences and conflicts as unwanted complications, if not threats, to this compatibility. Differences, as Jonathan Sacks (2002) notes, are considered "deeply threatening" in our abstractionist culture (p. 51). And this emphasis on similarity is carried into many human organizations and groups, where common abstractions often define group identity. The group unity, its relational bonding, is cast in terms of similar abstractions, such as beliefs, values, and philosophies. Many religious communities, for instance, presume that the commonality of their theological beliefs and values provides them unity.[iii] Political organizations often view their commonality of political theory or principle, such as "better programs" or "smaller government," as the source of relational bonds. There is surely little doubt about the widespread belief that similarity of abstractions provides the tie that binds, whether the abstractions are ethical codes, worldviews, or simple values.

Relationality. Strong relationality, on the other hand, affirms all types of relationships, whether relations of similarity, relations of difference, or some combination of the two. Abstractions are viewed as helpful, to be sure. Indeed, as mentioned, it is difficult to understand human language and thinking without the ability to form abstractions. Nevertheless, the relationist would hold that abstractions should not be presumed automatically to be the highest form of thinking or knowledge, and abstractions such as physical laws or diagnostic categories, should rarely be reified as if they are some ultimate reality. Relations of difference are just as important, interpersonally and intrapersonally, as Carl Jung (1955) and many others have contended. In fact, Kahnemann and Tversky (1983) have repeatedly noted the consistent human error of thinking in terms of abstracted stereotypes. Marilynn Robinson's (2016) wonderful book, *The Givenness of Things*, also describes how rarely we take our experiences for what they are. We instead derive, as she terms it, "tendentiously inhuman" "models of reality" and then apply them perniciously (p. 221). As the relationist Wittgenstein (1953) puts a similar warning: "…don't think, but look!" (#144).

This relational emphasis on both similarities and differences makes many abstractions, particularly universals, automatically suspect. This is not to say that some abstractions and universals are not valid. However, the Western propensity to emphasize relations of similarity, and thus deemphasize relations of difference, should cause us to pause in forming abstractions that can so easily become stereotypes. Indeed, a host of keen observers of cultural violence—

Rene Girard (1979), Jean-Francois Lyotard (1990), Emmanuel Levinas (1987), Richard Rohr (2016a), and Jonathan Sacks (2002)—have all touted the brutality of our Western emphasis on sameness. This violence is not necessarily physical, though physicality can be the ultimate result. The violence they all seem to point to, and they differ on so many other issues, is an abstracted understanding of the subject or person that stereotypes them through the omission of real and sometimes subtle differences that deeper understanding requires. Yet, as mentioned, this abstractionist emphasis on similarity has infiltrated human relationships in the West as *the* tie that binds.

The strong relationist, by contrast, assumes that relations of difference—what some might call diversity, richness, thickness, pluralism—are just as vital to vibrant communities. It is not unusual, for example, for long married couples to tout their differences, even conflicts, as the "spice" of their marriage and the "secret" of a successful relationship (e.g., Slife, 2017). John Inazu (2014), as another case in point, asks us to consider how a "confident pluralism" better embraces the reality of a larger community. Instead of the elusive American goal of *E pluribus unum*, his notion of confident pluralism suggests a more modest possibility—that we can live together in our "many-ness." Analogously, John Dupre' in his book *The Disorder of Things* (1996) cites cogent evidence for the "disunity" of the natural sciences, where unreplicated singularities and uniquenesses are just as prized as laws and principles. William James makes a similar case for the social sciences in his *A Pluralistic Universe* (1977). Dupre' and James both deny the simple ascendancy of the similar, and instead provide powerful reasons to include the many-ness inherent in the real world.

Theoretical Community. This valuing of differences has spawned such significant conferences as David Goodman's "Psychology and the Other," not to mention the sterling contributions to this dialogue of Freeman (2014), Morrissey (2018), Slaney (2018), and Teo (2010). Consider also Gantt and Reber (1999), among others, who point to Levinas's particularity of the face as opposed to abstracting of the person. Ilyes (2018) echoes this argument when she writes that human beings should be "seen and felt as . . . flesh and not as abstraction" (para. 1). Jim Lamiell's recent post (2017, personal communication) to the list serve of the Society of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology also illustrates the move away from an exclusive emphasis on relations of similarity and the move toward greater emphasis on relations of difference, including personal uniqueness. In his post, Lamiell describes a main tenet of his "personalistic thinking," writing that "persons must be regarded—scrupulously—as persons and not as instances of person categories." Again, these instances of the theoretical literature exemplify a trend away from the mere abstractness of thinking and thus simple relations of similarity. They represent a growing recognition of the new wave's inclusion of relations of difference as part of the very identity of people and things.

Comparison 3 – Simplicity

Abstractionism. Abstractionism has also led Western culture to favor the simple over the complex. Indeed, one of the more important uses of abstractions is to bring out simple and often subtle patterns from complicated practical phenomena. Even so, our abstractionist culture has sometimes gone a step farther—a step that signals the culture's perhaps unknowing embrace of an abstractionist ontology—in its assumption that the simpler (abstraction) is inherently better or

more profound than the complex. This age-old notion was made famous by the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, among others, who counseled that we should always look for the principle, the changeless permanence of the real, behind the transient appearances of our experiences (Viney, 1993). As Fowers, Richardson, and Slife (2017) describe in a recent book, even our everyday experience of "complications" is typically that of disappointment or frustration. Somehow, we expect the less complicated to be better than the more complicated. The simpler is perceived as less messy, more predictable, more controlled, and even more understandable.

This negative view of complications also seems to extend beyond the everyday. Many scientists, for example, consider the simpler or the "parsimonious" to be the inherently better experimental finding or theory. As the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy puts it, the simpler "has been widely advocated in the history of science and philosophy, and it remains widely held by modern scientists and philosophers of science" (http://www.iep.utm.edu/simplici/). This favoritism often goes by the name of "Ockham's Razor" and apparently prompted the noted physicist Edward Teller to write, "The main purpose of science is simplicity…" (Teller, Teller, & Talley, 1991, p. 2). Perhaps surprisingly, this tendency to extol the simple is also shared by many in the humanities. Artists and poets, for instance, have frequently equated the beautiful with the simple. Consider this statement from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1849): "In character, in manner, in style, in all things, the supreme excellence is simplicity" (p. 60). Walt Whitman (1855), too, seems to have favored simplicity: "Simplicity is the glory of expression" (p. 11).

Much like separability and similarity (the abstractionist characteristics above), preference for the simple has led our culture, whether lay or professional, not only to deride the complicated but perhaps more importantly to become less sensitive to the complications of changing context. Indeed, as Tim Hartford (2016) describes in his book, *Messy*, we experience the richness of context as a kind of "messiness," and messiness is typically considered bad. This "tendency to tidy-mindedness," to use Hartford's terms, is a close relative of simplicity. Both assumptions have led to important practices in the discipline of psychology, including standardization, manualization, and quantification. And indicative of the hidden dominance of abstractionism, such practices are promoted or provided without justification or defense.

Relationality. Relationality not only recognizes the potential import of the complicated, it also tries to avoid dualizing (separating) the simple and the complicated. Much like similarities and differences, the two ways of thinking complement one another, and need to be understood together for a robust understanding of either. We do not live in abstractland, the world of the simple and uncomplicated, contrary to the abstractionist interpretation of the world. Father Rohr (2017) warns, for example, that many understandings of religion have attempted to avoid the complexity and thickness of living: "Most of religion gives answers too quickly, dismisses pain too easily, and seeks to be distracted—to maintain some ideal order. So we must resist the instant fix" (para. 6). Marilynn Robinson (2016) probably makes the relational point more positively: "In all circumstances, complex . . . thinking is called for. . . . Scientific reductionism, good in its place, is very often used to evade the great fact of complexity" (p. 75).

But should even scientific reductionism—"good in its place," as Robinson correctly notes—be given a pass in science? Should such abstractionism be the only or even primary tool of

scientific thinking? Do psychological researchers consider reduction to the simpler as a mere "tool," or is it, rather, understood in many prominent corners of psychology as *the* way in which science is conducted, including parsimony, quantification, and standardization? Recall in the similarity section how leading lights in the natural and social sciences, such as Dupre' and James, have long contended that such reification risks researchers underestimating, if not ignoring, truths that are inherently complex. Albert Einstein was quick to catch on to this point in his own work: "Matters of elegance ought to be left to the tailor" (1915/2015, p. xiv). If anything, noted historians of science have extolled the importance of the complicated *over* the simple in the progress of science. Paul Feyerabend (1993) is perhaps most famous of these historians for his demonstration, one example after another, of significant scientific discoveries that occurred not through the simple application of scientific method, but through bald mistakes, unforeseen complexities, and serendipitously derived insights. His advice in light of this history is clear: do not even attempt to avoid the messiness of science. Embrace its inherent disorganization and anarchism if you want to obtain truly significant findings.

This advice is echoed in Hartford's book on messiness. Instead of imposing simplistic order from the "outside," expect and even encourage the messy in everyday life. Instead of some "rigorous" application of a system, logic, or method, he describes the "Master of Messy," Irwin Rommel, the brilliant World War II general who, for lack of appropriate resources, would have likely won the war for Germany because of his unconventional tactics and strategies. What if a similar model of messiness were held up for psychotherapy students to emulate? Would they be better prepared for the widely recognized messiness of particular client care? Currently, and especially prior to practical supervision, many students must rely on the abstractions of classical psychological theories, where the richness and messiness of real people are abstracted away. The relationist would undoubtedly advocate for some edification in messiness, perhaps some messiness skills akin to the practical wisdom of Aristotle. Aristotle was completely aware that important judgments require the deliberate weighing of particular contexts rather than the filtering out of these particulars for fear of endangering favored abstractions.

Theoretical Community. It should not be a surprise, then, that members of the theoretical community in psychology have voiced their concern about these very issues. Consider Rieken and Gelo (2015), for example, who believe that "the radical simplification of natural conditions" has led to a state where the "inscrutable wealth of subjective impressions [is] replaced by a world of simpler and eternal laws" (p. 70). They lament that psychology has aimed to model itself after the methods of physical experimentation, methods that they hold "oversimplif[y]" psychological phenomena (p. 74). Louchakova-Schwartz (2018) argues that even some qualitative researchers fall into this trap of prioritizing the simpler. Others, such as Fowers (2000) and Richardson and Slife (2017) devote an entire chapter to the importance of complexity in lived experience and human relationships. Clegg (2010) criticizes the psychology community for its discomfort with uncertainty, which he ties to its drive for simple, eternal truths. And still others, such as Sugarman (2007) and Sundararajan (2005), have pointed to movements within psychology (e.g., positive psychology) as simplistic or blind to the level of complexity and richness involved in their subject matter. These books and articles point clearly to a movement that recognizes and seeks to understand, without simplifying or reducing, the thick and complex phenomena that psychology encompasses.

Comparison 4: Idealization

Abstractionism. One way to approach the fourth comparison is to ask an ontological question about the messiness described in the previous section: is messiness *inherent* in the real and fundamental? In other words, is messiness unavoidable in a practical sense, or is it possible, however unlikely perhaps, for mere humans to overcome messiness and achieve some ideal—our fourth characteristic? Here abstractionism must affirm, however implicitly or explicitly, the possibility of practically reaching the ideal. After all, some abstractions *have* to be real for ontological abstractionism to be valid. The real, in this sense, does not *have* to include error, dysfunction, or imperfection; we can easily imagine mistake-free idealizations of just about anything. After all, popular conceptions of natural laws—themselves abstractions from observations—supposedly involve no dysfunction, imperfection, or error. These laws do what they do without mistake or exception.

Our ability to form such ideals is surely both a blessing and a curse. Ideals are blessings because these abstractions can help us to improve, grow, and reach higher in all kinds of endeavors. Still, they are curses because the belief that such ideals are truly real and thus reachable, with just enough effort or skill, can lead to some bedeviling expectations. Committee meetings, for instance, have long bedeviled the senior author in just this sense. His ability to form abstractions allows him to easily imagine committee meetings that are much more fun, productive, and efficient, leading him to lament the way in which most (all?) such meetings actually proceed. On the other hand, these same abstractions have helped him to lead better meetings, because a vision of the ideal helps him to improve them. The ontological issue here, then, is expectational. It is not whether ideals are possible or even good in some situations. The issue is whether we should believe that such ideals are truly reachable, because if they are, we will rightly experience some momentous expectations, and thus deep frustration with many big and small activities of our lives.

These abstractionist idealizations can also involve whole cultures. Wendy Farley (1990), for example, sees Western culture as subject to "secular myths of progress, the worship of technology, and dreams of personal success" (p. 11). If Farley is correct, such cultural idealizations are surely subject to the same blessing-curse dynamic we just described—a blessing because people will know and strive to make progress, a curse because people will be frustrated when culture does not. The culture of science, though more probabilistic, is really little different in this regard. When truth and knowledge are fundamentally contextless, then the ideal of eventual certainty of knowledge is possible and should be sought. As Sherwood Belangia (2010) explains, this was Plato's project for the West—overcoming *doxa,* the messiness of the "lower soul"—and Plato's project has continued into the present. Even Western religion reflects this idealization theme. It frequently assumes a similar form of absolute Truth—even though, as theologian Timothy Keller (2016) describes, this absolutizing may not be consonant with its own scripture. And, as mentioned, these abstractionist idealizations have influenced the tradition of theorizing in psychology, where it has long been classically understood that if one theorizes, one theorizes in terms of universals, another form of idealization.

Relationality. Strong relationality, by contrast, understands that human ideals and absolutes can often be unrealistic, misleading, and even potentially harmful goals. Messiness, whether error,

exception, or dysfunction is fundamentally and inherently *part of* the real, not some interloper that distorts our view of reality.[iv] Perhaps surprisingly, many experienced scientists reflect this relational understanding. Consider Albert Einstein (1921/1972) again, someone who thought a good bit about the idealization of certainty: "As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality" (para. 3). And if science, mathematics no less, can be understood as relationally messy in this regard, what then about the inherent messiness of Western culture and everyday living? Needless to say, the expectational issue is quite different in a relational perspective, because ideals, though helpful in many ways, are inherently unreachable. With more space, we would probably distinguish between goals that are reachable and ideals that are not. The point here is that people like the senior author should understand ideals differently, perhaps allowing him more satisfaction when committee meetings go reasonably well.[v]

Christopher Lasch (1980), in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*, also documents our cultural ideals regarding power and control. They frequently lead, in his view, to heedless and destructive excesses as we seek ideals of power and control that are not truly realizable. Too often, he argues, we have settled for the abstraction of "endless improvement," leaving us unable to cope with fundamental and perhaps even ontological human limitations. As a case in point, positive psychology's conceptions of human flourishing have frequently been informed by such ideals, where ultimate happiness and well-being are viewed as reachable (Gable, Profile, Gable, & Haidt, 2005; Keyes, 2002). But what if human limitations and human messiness are inherent in such attempts? Fowers, Richardson, and Slife (2017) show how human frailty, fragility, and dependence are part of, rather than apart from, human flourishing. Even our attempts to cope with human suffering have often succumbed to the abstractionism of unrealistic and unhelpful conceptions. Farley (1990), for instance, describes how the abstractionist tradition of Christian theodicy has stretched the potential purpose and meaningfulness of suffering to too many situations. Some suffering may have no meaning or purpose, other than our outrage at its occurrence.

The relationist would want to champion ontological humility in this regard. To believe that we can potentially attain such ideals is to partake of a kind of arrogance that can lead to many negative consequences. As William James (1912) pleads, "cannot we at least use our sense of our own blindness to make us more cautious" (p. 53). And the advancement of knowledge does not necessarily require these idealized goals. Josh Clegg (2017) rightly declares that "an uncertain, fallible, socially embedded science . . . can make smart phones just fine" (p. 6). To borrow Mark Freeman's (2015) term, good science calls not for the pretense of certainty, but for "hermeneutic humility" (p. 8). Lived reality, in this relational sense, is what Belangia (2014) calls a "defective reading," (para. 1) where defects are not factors to be eliminated but inherent in reality itself. We need to move, according to Belangia, from the premature closure of abstractionism to a noetic openness. The abstractionist conception of Truth is either too thin to hold everyday meaning or too irrelevant to matter. The relationist thus endorses the hermeneutic understanding of humans as possessing no final or complete understanding of the truth, with even *this* understanding open to debate.

Theoretical Community. Once again, relational flesh is put on these skeletal bones elsewhere. Indeed, several scholars working within the theoretical branch of psychology have argued that

limitations and suffering are perhaps essential to the human experience (Fowers, Richardson, and Slife, 2017). Instead of justifying or explaining away suffering, Bishop, Richardson, Freeman, and Slife have explored the notion of Farley's "tragic vision," where tragedy is not outside of our lives but inherent in them (Richardson & Bishop, 2004; Slife, 2004). Similarly, Lasch (1991) advocates a "wisdom of limits," which is necessary to any viable conception of redemptive suffering. Richardson and Slaney (2018) explore how this wisdom of limits can address some of the difficulties created by idealizations such as "equality" and "diversity." And as Richardson has described (e.g., Richardson & Guignon, 2008), Woodruff (1997) provides a helpful analysis of the virtue of "reverence," which appreciates aspects of the human condition that are beyond our control. Other writers in the theoretical community have directly critiqued the transhumanist movement, specifically the idea that science can lead to endless progress resulting in human perfection and immortality (Grant, 2018; Mitchell, 2018). These authors, along with many others, have been implicitly if not explicitly working to help us properly understand our relationship to idealizations.

Comparison 5: Top-Down

Abstractionism. The final characteristic of ontological abstractionism is the presumed direction of knowledge, application, and truth (or Truth). This direction is from the top of the "ladder of abstraction" to the bottom. The "top" means the most abstract, and the "bottom" means the least abstract. As we learned from the previous characteristics, abstractions such as natural laws and ethical principles are often considered the ultimate forms of knowledge and truth. It follows, then, that the important aspects of our lives proceed from these abstractions, whether codes, techniques, or formulas. Consider, for example, how the senior author has historically been Dr. Theory, or even Dr. Abstraction, for many of our university's counseling and clinical doctoral students over the years. This informal title is typically meant in jest, but it does betray his colleagues understanding that faculty should first teach students a collection of theoretical abstractions (i.e., personality/psychotherapy theory), which they then should apply in the concreteness and particularity of therapy—from the top of psychological theory to the bottom of therapeutic intervention. As Merleau-Ponty (1964) puts it, psychologists tend to look at particulars "from above," and think of them as "object[s] in general" (p. 160).

With the dominance of abstractionism, the top-down direction of knowledge and truth does not just pertain to the supposed relation of theory and application. This directionality is pivotal to all types of taken-for-granted thinking, from science and business to ethics and religion. The natural laws of science, for example, are typically viewed as emanating their power from the top down. The laws themselves, which are frequently understood as the most universal of entities, are considered to unite and govern all the relevant concrete and particular events of the world. This top-down governing is one of the origins of determinism, the notion that such laws determine their concrete events, and thus disallow "free will and personal responsibility" (Rychlak, 1979). The laws work from the abstract to the concrete, which may have historically inspired psychological methodologists, who frequently depict the conducting of scientific investigation as an application of higher-order method logic, such as different types of research design. In this top-down abstractionist sense, the scientific method is often seen as the testing of abstractions (hypotheses, theories). And this process is itself considered an orderly, systematic procedure

with clear principles for its concrete application in discerning the abstractions of natural laws and principles (Barlow, Nock, & Hersen, 2008; Kazdin, 2003).

Many non-science activities proceed with a similar directionality in the West. Many organizations, for example, assume that ethical abstractions, in the form of propositions and principles, are best for governing the concrete moral actions of their members. And many corporations understand power in this same top-down manner (Mintz & Shwartz, 1985; Mullins & Schoar, 2016). The classical organizational hierarchy, for example, exhibits this directionality, as the power of CEOs supposedly moves down to concrete applications among the "lower" employees. Consider also how many religious groups presume a similar directionality, with divine power and even sacredness operating from the top down, from God on high down to the people here below (Rohr, 2016b).

Relationality. Strong relationality, on the other hand, embraces the importance of bottom-up as well as top-down thinking and direction. Bottom-up thinking is moving from the concretely particular or "bottom" of a situation "up" to thoughts and abstractions about those particulars. Many parents experience their child-rearing as an especially salient example of this bottom-up situation. Particular activities of children occur, and decisions about how to deal with these activities are needed—parenting. The apparently bottom-up nature of parenting is partly why so many parents find this task so daunting. Our abstractionist top-down oriented culture does not prepare parents well. For example, psychological books on parenting are almost invariably of this top-down variety as they offer "parenting principles" that are vaguely helpful, but never seem to fit the parenting situation. Child-rearing is such a moving-target as children mature and sibling dynamics change seemingly moment by moment. Nevertheless, top-down strategies are so prevalent in Western training models that many "parenting experts" would likely be hard-pressed to know how to go about such training any other way.

It is also important, from the perspective of a relational ontology, not to dualize or separate bottom-up and top-down approaches. The relationist assumes that the particulars of the bottom and the abstractions of the top are inextricably related and cannot be understood in any complete way without taking the other into account. This inseparability (Characteristic 1) means not only that no bottom-up or top-down approach *should* occur without taking account of the other, but that no such approach ever *does* occur without the other. Whatever approach is not foregrounded is implicit. All fledgling therapists, for instance, are necessarily informed by the bottom particulars of their cases, despite their primarily theoretical education, just as all parents are necessarily informed by the top. In fact, parents are often surprised by the tacit abstractions they have formed about parenting from their own childhood.

From this non-dualist viewpoint, the abstract patterns of natural laws matter greatly, of course, but these patterns do not have to be interpreted as "governing" the bottom, and thus determining relevant concrete natural events. The concrete events themselves matter to these laws from a relational perspective. Indeed, this point was one of the significant implications of Einstein's theories of relativity, where Newton's laws of motion—formulated as working in a top-down manner—need to take into account the *particular* observer's inertial frame of reference (Einstein, 1915/2015). The economic law of supply and demand is another example. This law is popularly interpreted as governing consumer behaviors, as if the law itself determines the

economic actions of consumers (Ball & Seidman, 2012). Yet this abstractionist understanding of the law is, at best, misleading. There is little doubt that this "law" is an important abstraction of consumer choice patterns in light of supply and demand conditions, but the mere patterning of these choices does not make them governed from the top. The bottom—particular consumers themselves—help to determine the conditions of supply and demand as the consumers decide to buy or not buy.

Another relational problem with the abstractionist top-down interpretation of these behavioral patterns is that the principles, patterns, or rules of the top do not contain instructions for their application as they move "down" to the concrete. The therapy theories of novice therapists as well as the ethical principles of organizational members are frequently experienced at the bottom as thin, vague, and just plain too general—at best only part of the answer. Something like Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom, where particular context is always and necessarily involved, is needed to navigate any issue of judgment. Still other relationists criticize abstractionist understandings of power. Bourdieu (2005; Bourdieu, Thompson, Raymond, & Adamson, 1991), for instance, describes poignantly how the seemingly powerless can still foil leaders at the top. And Father Rohr (2003) explains his interpretation of Christianity as "bias from the bottom." Rather than God's power always emanating "downward," the sacredness and power of divinity is found in the ordinary—in art, music, and even menial practices—echoing Taylor's "affirmation of the ordinary" (Taylor, 1989).

Theoretical Community. These relational understandings have informed the research of many psychological theorists, including Morrisey (2011), Osbeck (2010), and Wachtel (2017), as well as Taylor's (1983) notion of social theory as practice, which Westerman (2004) and Yanchar have often championed. Westerman, for example, advocates an approach to conducting psychological research and theorizing that takes concrete practices, not methodologies or rules, as its starting point. Yanchar, Slife, and Warne (2008) suggest that the model of critical thinking in which psychology has long educated students and researchers is less effective because it overemphasizes the "rule-following" criticism of methods and procedures. Indeed, they suggest that critical thinking in psychology should itself be considered a practice—one that "incorporate[s] relational values such as dialogue, care, and respect"—rather than a method (p. 265). Hohn (2018) and Grice (2018) highlight recent controversies within psychology, such as the replication crisis, that exemplify methodological issues resulting from a too-strict adherence to the rules and customs of psychological methods and principles of measurement. They suggest, as do others (e.g., Slaney, 2018), that psychology can improve as a science by moving beyond these rules and attending in greater detail to the nature of phenomena being studied and adjusting methods based on that nature. In these examples and others, the shift away from abstractionist, top-down thinking has been underway in psychology's theoretical community for some time.

Conclusion

With this too-brief introduction, we hope some of the major players and important aspects of the new wave of psychological thinking are a little clearer. Presenting the relationship between the two ontologies was not merely a device of clarification. The new wave is not just an openness to the perspective of ontological relationality; it is also a sensitivity to the many aspects of Western culture, science, and professionalism, that are dominated by ontological abstractionism. Indeed,

the depth and breadth of this ontological framework may be surprising. Consider how the laboratory tradition, individualism, and dualism all owe their existence, at least in part, to implicit ideas that assume the separability of events, things, and people. And separability is merely the first characteristic of abtractionism. Consider how much of our culture is thought to depend on our capacity to formulate abstractions—relations of similarity—which supposedly describe our thinking and rationality as well as our derivation of scientific and ethical principles. The significance of similarity relations even extends to everyday human relations, where the pivotal bonds of marriage and community are presumed to be strengthened through similarity of abstractions, such as belief, value, and philosophy, and weakened through differences, conflicts, and otherness.

Strong relationality offers a fresh perspective on these and other themes of culture and professional understanding. In fact, the influences of this relational perspective have already begun to show themselves with the advent of qualitative research in psychology and the growing recognition that context is just as important as specific objects of study. We also cite important scholarship that points to vital questions and criticism of subject/object dualism in science and liberal individualism in culture. Subjectivity is not really minimized in science, and individualism is not necessarily the best path to the good life. Acknowledgement of these kinds of ontological connections among such widely divergent cultural themes allows us to understand and question the big ideas that are behind and enlivening them. Is it possible, for example, that things, people, and events are only separable in theory and not ontologically separable in reality? This question was clearly an implication of Einstein's work on relativity (Calder, 1979; Kenyon, 1990). And the second characteristic of abstractionism, similarity, raises an analogous question. Strong relationalists would question the elevation of relations of similarity, because relations of difference are just as important for understanding our world. Human relationships are probably where this question is most readily realized. Strong relationality would assume that real "compatibility" should include complementary differences as well as similarities, and that vibrant communities and marriages should be rich with creative tensions as well as commonalities.

Still another characteristic of abstractionism, simplicity, is also a pervasive cultural and professional norm. The popular understanding of "complications" nearly always assumes they are somehow negative, and the goodness of simplicity is explicitly praised in such widely varying spheres of endeavor as natural science, poetry, and religion. Messiness, in this same sense, is typically viewed pejoratively but thought to be overcomeable with the right effort and skill. Non-messy idealizations are not only possible, from this abstractionist perspective, but implicitly understood as the most real or fundamental modes of being. The problem with this understanding for the relationist, however, is that such expectations of ourselves and others can balloon out of proportion to reality. These unreasonable expectations can lead not only to stress and frustration but also to dangerous stereotyping and unreasonable collective abstractions, such as the need for perpetual happiness and endless progress. The relationist would hold, instead, that human limits, fragility, and frailty are part of, not apart from human flourishing.

Abstractionism is also quite evident in the supposed flow of knowledge in Western culture, from abstractions at the "top" to concretenesses at the "bottom." The best knowledge is widely thought to be abstractions of the world, whether principles, formulas, or strategies, that are then

applied to the concrete particulars of that world. Researchers apply experimental hypotheses, research designs, and statistics, while practitioners apply diagnostic categories, intervention techniques, and ethical codes. Even natural laws and corporate power are often understood to work from the top down. Natural laws supposedly govern from the top of the law, itself an abstraction from concrete observations, down to its particular sphere of determination. Business power is likewise frequently viewed as moving from management to labor. Yet, as the relationist notes, this abstractionist view of directional flow underestimates, and perhaps even ignores in many instances, the power of the particulars. Examples were provided about important powers emanating from "below," whether in human, divine, or natural systems. Indeed, this power of the particular *must* exist because the abstractions at the top give no instructions for the inevitable tailoring and adjusting that must occur for their use in the concrete world. The power of the particular is what makes these adjustments possible.

The new wave, for all these reasons, is the dialectical relation between these two ontologies. Their intimate relationship is part of our justification for not assuming that the practical manifestation of either ontology necessarily means its influence in some pure form. These two sets of ontological ideas *imply* one another dialectically, and so they can easily occur in many amalgams and mixtures. Our meaning of dominance, then, is that abstractionism is *more* influential in *more* particular practices, not that it is exclusively influential. Indeed, if relationality really does have ontological status, then it has always been present, and thus intuited, in the reality of the world all along. It has just been covered over with influential abstractions and historical interpretations of that world. Even so, we believe that the groundswell of relational work occurring in the theoretical community of psychology indicates that the time has come to identify and understand *both* of these ontological philosophies and to allow strong relationality a more prominent voice, especially in psychology.

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Endnotes

[i] We would contend that this ontology is the larger category of many familiar ontologies such as materialism, atomism, essentialism, mechanism, and even individualism. All of these more conventional ontologies are philosophical abstractions of the lived reality of the world. Indeed, until relatively recently (e.g. Wittgenstein, 1953) philosophy itself has been captured by this abstractionist enterprise.

[ii] This proclivity toward abstractions is part of the reason the authors favor the term "abstractionism" over "reductionism" in describing this complicated ontology. The term reductionism does not lend itself quite so readily to the import of abstractions in Western culture, nor the cultural propensity to abstract objects of study out of the situational and contextual.

[iii] This is very prominent among religious or political groups who assume that it is their beliefs which unite them. For example (editorial by Molly Roberts at Washington Post, mid-October, 2017), Rep. Tim Murphy was famously against abortion as a political abstraction, but when this abstraction was connected to the particularity of his life—an unwanted extramarital pregnancy threatening his marriage, political career, and future plans—he found himself in favor of it. This example is meant to be not a statement about pro-life advocates, because pro-abortion advocates are just as liable to affirm similar abstractions. Instead, this realization might help us: 1) not to assume that our abstract beliefs form our identities, and 2) to soften the hardness of our positions, given that they have rarely been tested with hard particularities. As Molly Roberts notes, you do not know what you would do until you actually experience it. Could this type of insight allow us to be less condemning of another's beliefs?

[iv] Such a view would quite obviously change many statistical models in psychology, where "error variance" is frequently partitioned outside of the supposedly real variance (Kazdin, 2003).

[v] As of this writing, Ohio State is up 41-7 AT THE HALF against Maryland (football game, 10/7/17). However, all the announcers can seem to do is criticize OU, which feels like the result of idealized abstractions (expectations) from arm-chair quarterbacks. There is apparently no inherent messiness in football, according to these announcers. Political and religious leaders also seem subject to the same unfair standards and comparisons (to the ideal). It is one of the parts of Western abstractionist culture that can make us very uncharitable toward one another.