

Hermeneutic Realism: Toward a Truly Meaningful Psychology

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This article presents a brief introduction to a hermeneutic realist approach to psychology, outlining its differences from mainstream psychology in its conceptions of context, change, and possibility. The term “hermeneutic” indicates that psychology’s subject matter (e.g., behavior, cognition) is understood more as contextually constituted meanings than as the conventional notion of self-contained objects. The “realism” portion of this phrase implies that this understanding does not devolve to a relativism or subjectivism, but it is grounded in the reality of the world. Hermeneutic realism is not considered a replacement to psychology’s current approach but rather is conceptualized and discussed as a needed supplement that leads to new psychological understandings, including new approaches to theory, method, and practice.

Keywords: hermeneutics, realism, ontology, worldview, meaning, theory, method, practice, unifying psychology, theory of psychology

We believe the assumptions of psychology are overly narrow. Examinations of psychology’s current assumptions have evidenced their productivity in guiding disciplinary inquiry and practice, but they have also revealed their limitations (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife, Reber, & Faulconer, 2012; Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005; Slife & Williams, 1995; Tallis, 2011). This essay is not a critique of these limits, but we believe an understanding of the limits is vital to an understanding of what lies *beyond* those limits. One important way to describe this understanding of psychology’s current limits and its “beyond” is to discuss psychology’s subject matter—how psychologists conceptualize what they are theorizing about, doing their research on, and practicing in relation to.

We champion *hermeneutic realism* as the primary candidate for this beyond or alternative (cf. Browning, 2003; Richardson, 1998).¹ The “hermeneutic” portion of this phrase indicates that our psychological subject matter is more like a meaning than an object. Our first task, then, is to clarify how meanings and objects are different in psychology.² We are grateful to those who have developed the hermeneutic tradition in this regard because we view these contributions as vital to our proposal (e.g., Bernstein, 1983; Gadamer, 2006; Ricoeur, 1984; Taylor, 1985).

Hermeneutic meanings are not mere subjectivities in this tradition (Bernstein, 1983; Widdershoven, 1992). The “realism” portion of hermeneutic realism implies that these meanings are grounded in the reality of the world. As Browning (2003) put it, this form of realism involves “a shared public sense of workable approximations to the descriptively true and normatively good” (p. 319). In other words, these meanings are just as real and poten-

tially truthful as any object or objectivity, but in this case reality is filled with meanings rather than objects (Browning, 2003; Richardson, 1998).

Psychology’s Subject Matter: Meaning Versus Object

Let us first clarify how an understanding of psychology’s subject matter differs between the conventional object-oriented perspective and the meaning-oriented perspective of hermeneutic realism through the topics of context, changeability, and possibility.

Context

Context is crucially important for any meaning. The same gesture of a hand can mean a greeting, child abuse, or absolution—all depending on the context of the gesture, including the context of time—what precedes (past) and follows (future) the gesture (Ricoeur, 1984; Slife, 1993). On the other hand, objects are thought to retain their basic identity regardless of the context; context does not change them essentially. For example, the *object* referred to as a “hammer” is basically considered the same regardless of its context whereas the *meaning* of a hammer can be a nail-pounder in one context and a paperweight in another.

This distinction might at first seem merely technical, but it is dramatic when one considers the reductionist vision of “hard science” that psychology has traditionally tried to emulate. Because this tradition assumed the conventional object-oriented worldview, it was important to separate context from object to reduce and simplify the topic to be studied. Indeed, the entire

¹ Don Browning (2003) provides a concise summary of the main philosophical tenets of hermeneutic realism. Particularly useful is how he distinguishes this realism—itsself a form of critical realism—from naïve realism and nihilism as well as the ideas of Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and Jurgen Habermas.

² As will become clear, we are thinking about meanings in a broad sense that includes situated practices.

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laboratory tradition is spawned by this assumption (Burt, 1932). By contrast, a meaning-oriented psychologist would view this simplification or reduction as an abstraction of the subject matter from the very context that partly provides its identity (Slife, 2004). Even physics has moved away from an object-oriented approach by recognizing the mutually constitutive nature of the observed and the observer (e.g., Bohr's quantum mechanics, Einstein's relativity theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle).

Changeability

Changeability is another important distinction between meanings and objects in understanding psychology's subject matter. Meanings are considered to be more changeable or "alive," and objects are thought to be less changeable and thus more "dead" or inert. Because meanings are so sensitive to context, and contexts can so easily change, meanings are themselves more liable to change. On the other hand, objects are considered to be relatively unchangeable because they are less sensitive to different contexts. For example, someone diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), according to an object-oriented worldview, is understood as "containing" the pathology within them, thus leading one to think that ADHD has "internal" biological origins and is essentially unchanged across widely varying contexts (Nigg, 2006).

Although this notion of ADHD can be a useful description of an individual for some purposes, it would be a mistake from a meaning-oriented worldview to identify or biologize the individual with this diagnosis. After all, it is well known that those diagnosed with ADHD have no problems abandoning their symptoms in the face of an interesting video game (Shaw, Grayson, & Lewis, 2005). As another example, postpartum depression—long considered to be contained within the individual and completely biological (Venis & McCloskey, 2007)—is also known to vary greatly from family to family and culture to culture (Schumaker, 2001).

Possibility

Another relatively overlooked difference between meanings and objects has been called "otherness" (e.g., Freeman, 2010), "dialectic" (e.g., Rychlak, 1976), and "possibility" (e.g., Slife, 1994, and see also Jung, 1964). What unites these labels is a singular quality of meanings, described by Joseph Rychlak (1977) as "reaching beyond themselves" (p. 55). Unlike objects, which have their own self-contained qualities, meanings and context mutually constitute one another. Any particular meaning is part of and derives its very being from a whole tapestry of other meanings, both similar and different. As Carl Jung (1964) once noted, this relationship among meanings implies possibility and otherness. Meanings imply not only what they are but (also) what they are not (or could be). To mean to "turn right" implies necessarily that one *could* have turned left, because the *meaning* of a right turn implies the *possibility* of a left turn (or not turning at all).

This reaching-beyond quality has a host of psychological implications, which we will explore in the sections following. First, it implies that humans have a kind of contextual agency that allows them to have a limited number of possibilities or choices (Rychlak, 1977). Second, all meanings are best understood not only in relation to what is similar but also in relation to what is different.

Identifying the ADHD "hyper" kids of a classroom may have as much to do with the contrasting "nonhyper" kids as anything else (Slife & Williams, 1995; Timimi, Taylor, Cannon, McKenzie, & Sims, 2004). Third, this reaching-beyond quality can also include important meanings of *otherness*, which include the significance of other people for our own identities as well as the significance of otherness dimensions of our lives, such as the spiritual or transcendent (Freeman, 2007; Slife, Reber, & Lefevor, 2012).

These three topics or issues—context, changeability, or possibility—illustrate how the worldview of a hermeneutic realist offers a genuine alternative to the object-oriented qualities of psychology's subject matter. This alternative, as we will see, creates opportunities for new theories, investigations, and practices.

Psychology's Theory: Individual Versus Relational

This change in how the subject matter of psychology is perceived significantly affects *how* theorizing occurs and *what* theorizing is.

The "How" of Theorizing

Conventional psychological theorizing operates with two (usually unexamined) object-oriented assumptions: what matters most is the interior of the individual, and all theories should be cast as universals. In the first case, theories should focus on what is "inside" because the qualities of any object, including the "object" of individual people, are inherent within the object itself. Virtually all the traditional researchers of psychology assume that the human phenomena of interest are inherent, internal properties of the individual, including memory, attitude, emotion, motivation, and cognition. This assumption is also true of all traditional schools of psychology: the intrapsychic dynamics of psychoanalysis, the reinforcement history of behaviorism, the actualizing self of humanism, and the schema of cognitive behaviorism.³

On the other hand, a meaning-oriented approach to theory emphasizes the relational over the individual and the holistic over the atomistic. For example, in psychotherapy one can certainly maintain concern for happy and healthy individuals, but the priority is on good relationships, communities, and cultures as well as fears of community ostracism and relational rejection (Guignon, 2012; Slife, 2004). Relationships from the traditional perspective are often merely "support systems" for fulfillment of the individual, whereas relationships from the meaning-oriented perspective are the whole from which individuals partly derive their very identities (Slife & Wiggins, 2009). As a more experimental example, consider how memory is traditionally viewed as inside the head of individual persons and thus separable from its context. However, Loftus's (1980, 1996) research among many others has demonstrated the inextricable relation of memory to its context. Memories literally change in relation to a host of contextual factors (Yanchar, 2005). As a result, *situated cognitive* approaches are

³ Of course, there are offshoots of all of these traditional theories that put more emphasis on interaction with context, but few treat this context as sharing the very being of the persons they are trying to explain. For example, Carl Jung and Harry S. Sullivan postulated fairly intimate connections with what we are calling context here. Our main purpose is to note the predominant mode of theorizing, especially in academic psychology, in which Jung and Sullivan's contextual legacy is diminished if not invisible.

now establishing an important foothold in experimental psychology and neuroscience (Krahé, 1990).

Another important difference between object-oriented and meaning-oriented approaches to theory concerns the implicit assumption of universalism. Virtually all traditional psychological theorists assume that they must postulate universals or generalized principles when they conceptualize psychological phenomena. For example, although Freud saw primarily Austrian patients and Rogers saw primarily Americans, both still felt obliged to propose universal principles of human nature, as if contextual differences, such as culture, were of no consequence. However, the hermeneutic realist would view those differences as potentially pivotal to all manner of psychological phenomena, from memory (Yanchar, 2005) to development (Scarr, 1992) to even the structure of the brain (Wexler, 2006).

The universality of conventional theory may also explain the popular migration away from schools of theory. For example, therapists trained in these schools eventually see their limits in the rich context of practice and attempt to move beyond them, frequently calling themselves “eclectics” as a result (Slife & Reber, 2001). As mentioned, research on the contextuality of memory has led to conceptions in which cognitive approaches could themselves vary from culture to culture (Krahé, 1990). Theories, in this sense, are not universal absolutes; they are limited and humble ideas that originate from a particular context for the purpose of a particular context (Postman, 1984; Slife & Reber, 2001; Slife & Richardson, *in press*). Even the theorizing of the present writing is situated within the hermeneutic tradition and must be understood accordingly. From this perspective, the “how” or process of theorizing includes and perhaps even emphasizes the more relational and particular. Theories stress not only the betweenness of *persons* and their accompanying contexts but also the betweenness of *theories* and their accompanying contexts.

The “What” of Theorizing

The content of psychological theory—what theorizing should include—is also changed from the object-oriented approach. In the interest of space, we discuss here just two prominent themes of a conventional theoretical approach, determinism and egoism, although neither theme is typically identified (in conventional psychology).

First, the object-oriented approach emphasizes various determinisms because of the essential unchangeability of the object (described above; see also Rychlak, 1979). Objects are typically understood to be naturally at rest or inert until something external to them *causes* them to move or change. In this sense, individuals are naturally *being* rather than *becoming*; therefore, some other object, whether through internal (e.g., humanism, biologism) or external means (e.g., behaviorism, environmentalism) or some combination, is automatically assumed to determine their movement or variation.

By contrast, a meaning-oriented approach assumes neither the essential isolation nor the natural unchangeability of persons. As described above, individuals are involved in highly variable contexts that co-constitute them; they are humans becoming rather than humans simply being. These individuals experience not only a world of limits and necessity (“musts”) but also a world of prospects and possibilities (“coulds”). For this reason, the

meaning-oriented theorist postulates neither an isolated “free will” nor a determined “mechanism” of personhood but instead frames possibilities that intimately involve the constraints and opportunities of the immediate context, including the person’s past, biology, environment, culture, and so forth (e.g., Martin & Sugarman, 2002; Slife & Hopkins, 2005).

A second theme of the “what” of theorizing is how easily an object-oriented approach lends itself to egoism. By egoism we mean simply an emphasis on the isolated and relatively contextless person, both in explanation and in treatment (see *Psychology’s Practice: Contextless Versus Contextual*). Because the object of psychology is most important for theory, by definition, theory is individual or self-oriented, as if relationships matter only secondarily or instrumentally (to serve the ego)—hence, egoism (Reber & Osbeck, 2005). Freud’s “pleasure principle” fits nicely here, as does the motive toward “reinforcement” for the behaviorist and the self-actualization, rather than other-actualization, for the humanist.

However, as mentioned, a meaning-oriented framework is more concerned with relationships than selves (Gantt, 2005; Slife & Richardson, 2008). This difference implies that our contexts, including other people and even spiritual dimensions, matter just as much as the self does (with the self as a nexus of relations). To just “watch out for #1” is “self” defeating, according to this framework, because even our own interests are often served by serving those of others—cultivating good relationships. Here, Blaine Fowers’ (2000) explanation of the high percentage of divorce in the United States is an example of this meaning framework in action, describing, as he does, the effects of this egoism (or individualism) on marriage. His advocacy of virtue ethics for psychology is a prime example of a more meaning-oriented alternative to the egoism and determinism of mainstream psychological theory (Fowers, 2005a).

Psychology’s Research: Value-Free Versus Value-Laden

Similar to theory, the differences between a meaning-oriented and an object-oriented approach to research are too numerous to review completely here. We illustrate a few of the broader issues by focusing on two of the more important differences regarding values and experience.

Values in Research

An object orientation presupposes (before investigation) that subjective values and assumptions will distort the researcher’s experience of the normally value-free objects of psychological investigation. As a prominent research methods text puts it, “Scientists look for *independent* evidence of their claim: objective evidence that does not depend on the scientist’s theory or personal viewpoint” (Schweigert, 2006, p. 2). In short, as every psychology student learns, biases are bad, especially when biases are involved in research.

By contrast, a meaning orientation assumes that context, including the values and assumptions we bring into the research context, partly *constitutes* psychological topics of interest. In this sense researcher biases cannot be avoided and, in fact, guide any form of inquiry. Consider the “allegiance effect” or “sponsor effect” in this regard, in which preinvestigation loyalty appears to be highly

influential in research on therapy and medical outcomes (Luborsky, Barrett, Antonuccio, Shoenberger, & Stricker, 2006; Slife, 2009). Even the researcher's valuing of the mythic "value-freeness" has led investigators to favor a limited set of research designs and research topics (Slife, 2009; Williams, 2005). Because these values are rarely made explicit in research reports, it is difficult to see their effect. For this reason, hermeneutic researchers advocate that scientists identify these values and assumptions when they conduct research. All scientists should also account for these values and assumptions in relation to their findings because other types of methods, as guided by alternative assumptions, can produce other types of results (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife & Melling, 2012; Slife Reber, & Faulconer, 2012).

Moreover, the meaning-oriented researcher views qualitative methods as just as valuable as quantitative methods, unlike the clear preference for quantitative methods in mainstream methods texts (Packer, 2011). A hermeneutic realism would guide *both* types of methods. All investigators would (a) identify important research values and assumptions, (b) consider those values and assumptions when interpreting their resulting data, (c) ground their results in the real meanings of the world, and (d) view whatever is investigated as part of a larger whole or tapestry of meaning. As an example, consider the changes that have occurred recently in neuropharmacology research. Because funding sources (e.g., the pharmaceutical industry) were widely perceived to be influencing the outcome of drug investigations—the sponsor effect—these researchers are now required to reveal these sources (Food & Drug Administration, 1998), allowing critical readers to evaluate study outcomes in light of potential biases.

Experience in Research

In an object-oriented psychology, objects are presumed to be observable, in principle. This presumption has meant that a narrow brand of empiricism—in psychology's case, those experiences that others can observe—are the only experiences that scientists believe they can validly know. However, this epistemology is problematic to a whole spectrum of experiences that psychologists highly value and people believe they have some valid knowledge of, from emotions to thoughts to attitudes. Even relationships fit this category. They are *experienced*, to be sure, but relationships are the "betweenness" of observable things (e.g., words, persons) that are never literally observed (Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005).

Traditional psychology tries to overcome this obstacle by operationalizing. For example, researchers might translate the non-observable "love" into an observable count of "hugs and kisses." Indeed, this procedure is widely taught as an indispensable approach to psychological investigation (Mitchell & Jolley, 2013). However, from the perspective of a meaning-oriented psychologist, operationalism is the method tail wagging the topic dog. What is *actually* studied is what is acceptable to psychology's object-oriented method; it is not the real topic of interest. Hugs and kisses can serve as operationalizations when studying the topic of love, but hugs and kisses can occur without love, and love can occur without hugs and kisses. There is no necessary tie between the topic of interest and the operationalization. Indeed, because the relationship between the topic and operationalization is not itself observable, we cannot know this relationship in the narrowly empirical sense. Bottom line: we cannot know if the topic of our

interest is even being investigated through operationalizations yet this is the nature of many of our disciplinary findings.

However, this problem is only the result of the epistemological restrictions we self-impose when training students to conceptualize and report research. The problem goes away with any number of broader epistemologies, those that embrace more experiences than the merely sensory. For this reason, the meaning-oriented approach welcomes a pluralism of methods and methodologies (Postman, 1984; Slife & Gantt, 1999; Sugarman & Martin, 2005), including other forms of empiricism (e.g., James's "radical empiricism," 2002). Indeed, the increasing disciplinary importance of qualitative methods is a prime example of this kind of pluralism, especially if the alternative epistemology of qualitative methods is recognized (Slife & Melling, 2012). In this sense, even spiritual experiences can be understood as experiential meanings and not operationalized into something possibly unrelated to it (Slife and Reber, 2012).

Psychology's Practice: Contextless Versus Contextual

Any shift from an object-oriented to a meaning-oriented worldview also implies a shift in disciplinary practices. For the sake of illustration and brevity, we focus here on psychotherapeutic practice, although there are myriad other practical implications for parenting, education, marriage, and so forth.

Context

Most therapists, whatever their orientation, will attest to the importance of client contexts in their work. Still, the conventions of therapy, partly stemming from an object-oriented medical model, have forced a kind of contextless treatment onto the therapist. For example, it is not coincidental that individual therapy is the most popular mode of treatment in an object-oriented psychology (Prochaska & Norcross, 1983). Because individuals are thought to contain all their qualities (see *Psychology's Theory: Individual Versus Relational*), and thus contain all their abnormalities, therapy problems are often viewed as individual in nature. In fact, this understanding of abnormality and treatment is the reason clients are typically asked to come to the therapist's office—they are assumed to carry within them their essential qualities and problems from context to context, with no particular context considered to make an important difference.

On the other hand, a meaning-oriented therapist challenges the popularity of individual therapy among practitioners because clients do not contain their qualities and abnormalities. Everything that clients are is vitally related to the contexts that partly constitute them. This means, at a minimum, that therapists should know *about* the contexts of client struggles and problems, if not actually go to and experience these contexts with clients for assessment and treatment (Schumaker, 2001; Slife & Wiggins, 2009). Some of this "contextuality" is obviously anticipated by systems treatments, such as family and group therapy, but many of these treatments, given the dominance of an object-oriented worldview, are conducted as little more than "individual therapies with the rest of the group as an audience" (Slife, 1993, p. 9; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Therapies that truly try to take context into account include the group-oriented approaches of the existentialist Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, the holists of family therapy, such as Salvador Minuchin

(1974), and many of the relationists of psychoanalysis (Aron & Lechich, 2012), such as Stephen Mitchell (1988).

Value-Freeness

The notion of value-freeness—that one can and should eliminate all subjectivity and biases—infests psychotherapeutic methods as much as it infests research methods (see *Psychology's Research: Value-Free Versus Value-Laden*; Richardson, 2005; Slife, Reber, & Lefevor, 2012). Indeed, the traditional ideal of many therapy-training programs is the “therapist as [objective] scientist” (Graziano & Raulin, 1993, p. 123). The popularity of evidence-based practice is driven, in part, by the same desire to objectify therapy with value-free procedures and structures. Values and biases are such a great concern that there is a prominent ethical sanction against “imposing” them (American Counseling Association, 2005; American Psychological Association, 2002), as if this ethic were not itself a value.

Although few professionals, including the hermeneutically attuned therapist, would desire to force their values onto anyone, the notion that values can be avoided is undoubtedly a myth. In fact, the falseness of this myth is the clear conclusion of over a half-century of research on values and therapy (Ali, Allmon, & Cornick, 2011; Tjeltveit, 1999). Therapists inevitably attempt to persuade their clients to adopt their values (Slife, Smith, & Burchfield, 2003). Even supposedly “value-free” or “open-minded” therapists try to persuade their clients to a host of values, including persuading the client to be “value-free” or open in their caring of others. In this sense, open-mindedness is a *particular* value, not a *non-value*.

A case can also be made that therapy simply cannot occur without a moral context (Richardson, 2005). For example, the therapist’s understanding of the *good life* is pivotal to therapist goals and guidance, no matter how “nondirective” therapists may see themselves. Therapeutic discussions about values are inevitable (Fowers, 2005b); therefore therapists must be trained to appropriately recognize and deal with these discussions. Training programs cover professional ethics, but they typically omit the productive handling of the moral tensions surrounding the good life. Pretending that evidence-based practice is free of values merely compounds the training problem. Methodological values are inevitably reflected in what is considered evidence-based practices (Messer, 2001; Slife & Wendt, 2010). Consequently, therapy training should be provided not only in how methodological values infiltrate evidence-based practices but, more importantly, in how values are best managed in the therapy session. Classes should be offered that evaluate different understandings of the good life as well as how the therapist productively handles conflicts in these understandings.

Time

The concept of time is deceptively important to the psychotherapist. Therapists and clients formulate goals for the *future*, assume problems have their origins in the *past*, and conduct treatment in the *here-and-now*. A meaning-oriented practitioner views the *meaning* or experience of these three aspects of time—past, present, and future—as more relevant than some *objective* aspects of time that are considered independent of consciousness and context

(Ricoeur, 1984; Slife, 1993). For example, when considering things from the past, any practical sense of what “actually happened” is itself a meaning that is framed by the personal and community context. For example, the meaning of “abuse” has changed across time, with some “parenting strategies” just a generation ago (e.g., the belt) now viewed as abuse.

This shift from the object to the meaning of time also has vital implications for practice. Perhaps most striking is the changeability of our personal past. If the meaning of the past is more practically relevant than the “objective fact” of the past, then what was once a “childhood trauma” could, given a changed context with the person involved, become a “good lesson learned.” In a practical sense, changing the meaning of the past is *changing the past* for a person because the meaning of the past *is* the person’s experience of the past (Ricoeur, 1984; Slife, 1993; Slife & Fisher, 2000). From this perspective, the past cannot permanently “scar” a person because the meaning of the past can change, especially with a change in the present context (possibilities). In short, there is always hope. And virtually all the research on the changeability of memory supports this perspective (Loftus, 1996).

Conclusion

We acknowledge that this introduction to a hermeneutic psychology is limited. However, we hope our point is clear: an alternative worldview is available to the discipline that provides a dramatically different understanding of its subject matter yet is consistent with all its data. Indeed, we would contend that only when psychologists view human beings as immersed in a context of meanings can they hope to account for the *entirety* of being human. The notion that psychology can or should *only* exist as an “objective” (i.e., object-based) science is misguided and necessarily leads to the denial of some of the most fundamental aspects of human experience (e.g., possibility, changeability, relationships, particulars, values). We believe not only that hermeneutic realism is a viable alternative to this object-based approach but also that this realism can more fully accommodate specifically human dimensions of experience.

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