

Commentary on *Logical Operations in Theory-Building Case Studies* by William Stiles

**Evaluating the Philosophies of Theory-Building in Case Studies**

**BRENT D. SLIFE<sup>a,b</sup> & MICHAEL RICHARDSON<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT

<sup>b</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brent D. Slife, 1073 SWKT, Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602-5543.  
Email: [brent\\_slife@byu.edu](mailto:brent_slife@byu.edu)

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this reply to Stiles' (this issue) article is threefold: identify his particular philosophy of theory-building, expose some of its problems for evaluation, and describe another philosophy of theory-building as a point of comparison. The article begins by describing how Stiles' philosophical approach to theory-building is ontologically dualist in nature. Dualism is evident in his view of experience, signs, meanings, knowledge, and truth. We point not only to general problems with this dualism but also to specific problems with Stiles' particular formulation. We then describe a nondualist philosophy in a successful case study movement outside psychology, namely *Consumer Reports* car ratings. It is only in comparison with such nondualist approaches that we can begin to evaluate Stiles' proposal and properly serve the important project of case study evaluation.

*Key words:* case study; case history; theory-building; ontology; epistemology; hermeneutic realism; ontological relationality; philosophy of science; *Consumer Reports* model

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The importance of "building theories" from case histories seems undeniable. If we desire to have good and useful theories of psychotherapy, the unique qualities of individual cases have to be taken into account. After all, it is often the specific case that we are attempting to serve with our therapeutic theories. Theory-building also appears pivotal to the case study movement that this journal represents. How helpful would a case history be if we have no way of judging the quality of our understandings and theories about them? For these reasons and others, we welcome the contribution of William Stiles (this issue). His article is valuable not only for its practical and theoretical insights but also as an exemplar of an important perspective on the theory-building enterprise.

Our main problem with Stiles' (this issue) intriguing proposal is that he does not present his perspective *as* a perspective. In other words, we will attempt to show in this article that his notion of theory-building stems from one particular epistemology and, perhaps more importantly, from one particular ontology. We should be clear that we have no problem with someone using a particular epistemology and ontology. Indeed, we wonder whether anyone can

avoid such particularity. Our issue, rather, is that Stiles does not explicitly *identify* his epistemology and ontology, making his proposal more difficult to evaluate.

Someone might immediately counter that identifying such philosophical assumptions is practicing philosophy rather than psychology. However, Stiles *is* practicing philosophy when he attempts to persuade us to adopt a particular philosophy of theory-building; he conducts no study and presents no empirical data. The only way to evaluate his philosophy is to identify it *as* a philosophy, consider its problems, and compare it to other potential philosophies of theory-building. Stiles, however, hampers this evaluation by neither identifying nor justifying his particular choice of philosophy.

Therefore, the purpose of this reply to Stiles' (this issue) article is threefold: identify his particular philosophy, expose some of its problems for evaluation, and describe another philosophy of theory-building as a point of comparison. We begin by describing how Stiles' philosophical approach to theory-building is ontologically dualist in nature. Dualism is evident in his view of experience, signs, meanings, knowledge, and truth. We point not only to general problems with this dualism but also to specific problems with Stiles' particular formulation. We then describe a nondualist philosophy in a successful case study movement outside psychology. It is only in comparison with such nondualist approaches that we can begin to evaluate Stiles' proposal.

## IDENTIFYING STILES' PHILOSOPHY

### *Dualism and Its Implications*

Ontological dualism generally assumes that there are two fundamental realities of the world (Griffin, 2000). In this case, we are primarily interested in the dualistic distinction between the worlds of subjectivity and objectivity (Bishop, 2007). Experiences such as thought, emotion, and interpretation are considered internal and "subjective," whereas the material "objective" world is considered external and "mind-independent" (Bishop, p. 48).

This particular ontology makes some fundamental assumptions that have epistemological implications. First, the notion that internal or subjective reality is separate from an external or objective reality suggests the possibility that the former might interfere with gaining knowledge of the latter. Specifically, such internal experiences as values, preferences, beliefs, and interpretations could distort an objective rendering of the world. In this sense, there is no such thing as objective experience because our experience of the objective world is always through our subjective "lens," and thus only a representation of that world.

Second, although observation is still experience, and thus subjective from a dualist perspective, it is considered the closest subjective experience to the objective world. Hence, empiricism, and its emphasis on sensory experience, is usually the chosen epistemology of the dualist. Observation is thus privileged over other experiences that seem to arise from "within" (e.g., thoughts, feelings), or experiences that may arise from sources other than the five senses (e.g., spiritual experiences). After all, the external world is the realm about which we wish to gain knowledge since it is presumed to be separate from us.

This separation also implies an ongoing epistemological task: dualists must constantly seek correction of their subjective representation of reality. This correction requires rigorous attempts to both eliminate the distortion of subjective biases and seek the correspondence between subjective representations (theories) and objective reality (data) (Fishman, 1999). Gauging this corrective correspondence is frequently considered the province of the scientific method—the logic for gathering systematic, value-free observations.

### *Dualism of Stiles' Philosophy*

Three pivotal elements of Stiles' theory evidence the dualism of his assumptions. These include the distinctions he draws between signs and meanings, his description of how observations are corrected, and the emphasis on correspondence in his overall philosophy. We consider each of these in turn.

#### Distinction of Signs and Meanings

Stiles' (this issue) dualism is perhaps most obvious in his distinction between signs and meanings. He (this issue) contends that the *meaning* of a sign is “in someone's experience,” “subjective” (p. 7), and “private” (p. 7), whereas the *sign* is “tangible” and out “in the world” (p. 7). The mental experience of the sign is thus distinguished from the sign itself, creating a dualism of internal mental realities and external material realities. How, though, do we know we have the correct meanings of our signs? This, according to Stiles, requires “gradually revising the descriptions in light of further observations” (p.2).

#### Corrective Observations

The presumed necessity of correcting observations is immediately evident in Stiles' (this issue) initial definition of theory. Stiles defines theory as “descriptions of aspects of the world” and goes on to say that “quality control” (p. 1) or the goodness of a theory depends on comparing these descriptions with subsequent observations to see if they “match” (pp. 2, 14). However, Stiles also notes that the meaning of a theory is “subjective” (p. 8) and “private” (p. 9), thus separating the internal experience of a theory from corrective “objects, events, and qualities of the world” which “cannot be known directly” (p. 10).

This encapsulating of experience within a subjective self and the barring of this self from direct knowledge of the world are clear reflections of a dualist ontology. In this sense, it is not surprising that Stiles also shares a dualist epistemology, reflected in his expectation that “empirical” observations may increase subjective observers' “confidence” in their theory or subjective representation of reality (p. 14). This expectation persists even though “we cannot know the world directly” (p. 10). Our observation of the world is “as much a product of our own biological, psychological, and cultural makeup as of the objects and events that impinge on us” (p. 10). The ultimate subjectivity of observation, then, raises the question: If we cannot get outside our subjective experience, even in observation, how then do we get to the objective world for correction?

#### Correspondence Epistemology

In answering this question, Stiles depends, as do most dualists, on correspondence methods. As he writes, “Researchers creatively modify their theories by (abductively) adding to them or altering them so that they *correspond* to accumulating observations” (p. 1, emphasis ours). He goes on to write that a “theory is a good one if people’s experiences of the theoretical descriptions correspond with their experiences of observing the objects and events of the world” (p. 2). Such correspondence thus provides “quality control” (pp. 1, 8) for the theory. Conversely, “when researchers’ experience of the observations fails to correspond to their experience of the theory, even after methodological checks, researchers may...modify the theory...so that it does match” (p. 12).

Here, Stiles is typical of many dualists in his focus on the traditional scientific method. Because observations are themselves experienced and guided by our representations of the world (and thus are subjective, potentially biased, and selective), the scientific method is the main resource for “cleaning up” the subjectivity of these observations, and thus providing access to an external reality. Of course, it is implicit in this notion of “clean-up” that the logic of this method is not itself value-laden. If it were value-laden, it would be another extension of our subjectivity, and thus would prevent access to the objective reality so necessary to correction and correspondence.

Ultimately, this goal of correspondence between theory representation and empirical observation assumes that there is some gap that needs to be bridged, or two separate “realities” that need to be brought into correspondence. Without a subject-object split, or a misalignment between the mental and physical realms, there would be no need to seek correspondence.

## **PROBLEMS OF DUALISM**

As we indicated, our concern is not so much that Stiles is writing from a particular ontology and epistemology; our concern is that his point of view was not articulated *as* a point of view. This means that certain problems may be left unaddressed, and these problems can be viewed as “the way things are.” To illustrate, we will first outline three of the classical problems of ontological dualism in general: drawing the line, the subjectivity of the “correction,” and the interaction of two realities. We also describe how these overlapping problems are reflected in Stiles’ particular brand of dualism.

### ***Drawing the Line***

The ultimate subjectivity of experience highlights the question of where to draw the line between subjective and objective realities (Griffin, 2000; Viney & King, 2003). In the context of the present discussion, if an external reality can never be fully known—if we can never get outside our experience of the reality—then how do we really know where our perceptions end and the external reality begins? Or from a theory-building perspective, how do we distinguish between subjective theoretical representations and subjective observations of objective data? How can we know the extent to which the internal world of perceptions, meanings, and interpretations influences our observations of external reality?

Stiles does not escape a dualist ontology by situating truth in statements (signs) rather than in the material world (Stiles 2006). He has simply moved from one physical object to another. A symbolic object, statement, or sign, is still assumed to be external to the (subjective) meaning of the interpreter. According to Stiles (this issue), “Signs are tangible and observable in the world” (p. 7). However, as noted, observations of these signs are still part of experience, and thus subject to the private meanings and representations of the observer.

Consequently, when Stiles asserts that “qualities of the world (the things to which signs refer) cannot be known directly” (p. 9), he is acknowledging that our experience of the real world is fraught with subjective qualities, disallowing even signs from being known “directly.” Nevertheless, this acknowledgement does not solve the “drawing the line” problem; it merely acknowledges it. Questions about “drawing the line” still arise, such as “where do our theoretical representations end and the signs or cases to which they refer begin?” We are really no closer to distinguishing between a subjective and objective world, or if we are, we have no way of knowing it.

### *The Subjectivity of the “Correction”*

Problems in drawing the line between these two realities merely highlight or compound the problem of correcting our subjective theories (Griffin, 2000; Viney & King, 2003). As we know, “objective” observations are subject to problematic “subjective” influences, such as selective attention and confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). If these corrective observations are themselves subject to these types of “subjective” influences, how can we tell whether a subsequent observation is more accurate than a previous one? Moreover, how can we measure the influence of subjective experience on perceptions of an external objective world that cannot be directly known in the first place?

Stiles might attempt to address these questions by focusing on the “indirectness” of this objective correction. As he contends, the world “cannot be known directly” (p. 9). If we could progressively eliminate our subjective biases, he might contend, this indirectness moves us toward directness and objective correction becomes increasingly tenable. Unfortunately, this “solution” assumes that we can separate subjectivity from objectivity and indirectness from directness—even if little by little—when this is the very issue we are attempting to address with the solution. In other words, merely assuming that dualism works does not solve the problems of dualism. In fact, there is considerable scholarship indicating that biases and values are never really removed from our methods and data (Polkinghorne, 1983; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Robinson, 1985; Slife, 2008; Slife, Smith, & Burchfield, 2003; Tjeltveit, 1999). Indeed, the dualist’s notion that we *should* strive to be value-free in our corrections could itself be considered a value.

Stiles could respond that his description of abduction does not presuppose value-freeness; values and biases might inform the way theories are abductively altered. However, it is clear from Stiles’ description of how theories are modified that the direction of correction is from observation to theory and not the reverse. As he put it, “When the observations fail to match the theory...researchers may creatively (abductively) modify the theory by adding to it or altering it so that it does match.” (p. 12). So it appears that even if Stiles acknowledges that values and

biases have something to do with the process (and it is not clear that he does), it is the observations that ultimately change the values and biases (and hence the theories) and not the values and biases that ultimately change the observations. In other words, Stiles gives us no reason to believe that his “methodological checks” (p. 12) are any different from those assumed by dualists to remove biases. His one-sided privileging of observation still implies a value-freeness of the observation itself because values or biases are placed at the mercy of observation, but the reverse influence remains unacknowledged.

The dualist problem, again, is the widespread recognition of the inescapability of values *while* observations are gathered. Surely, the dualist might respond, humans know about the world *somehow*, because they clearly interact with it in relatively effective and successful ways. We have no difficulty granting this point and even granting the need for *some* kind of correction in general. What is at issue here is not *whether* we know the world to some important degree (which we grant) but *how* we know it. If there are alternative approaches to knowing this world, and thus gaining corrections, then we should identify the approaches we are taking in order to evaluate their advantages and disadvantages.

### ***The Interaction of Two Realities***

Perhaps the best-known problem with dualism has been termed the “problem of interaction” (Griffin, 2000; Leahey, 1992; Viney & King; 2003). This problem involves the difficulties of explaining how two fundamentally different things, subjective and objective realities, can interact or work together, a classical problem clearly evident in Stiles’ correspondence epistemology.

For example, a theory is good, according to Stiles (this issue), if a person’s understanding of the theory *corresponds* to their “experiences of observing the objects and events in the world” (p. 2). Stiles’ insertion of “experiences” before “observing” seems intended as an acknowledgement of the interpretive or subjective nature of these observations. However, this acknowledgement does not excuse Stiles from a dualist ontology; it only highlights the problems of interaction that result from a correspondence epistemology. Why does he care whether these two sets of subjectivities—theories and experiences—“correspond” to each other, and how does this correspondence between these two subjectivities help us to build good theories about the *objective* world?

Stiles’ rationale for favoring observation is also unclear. By assuming that a “good” theory results when “experiences of the theoretical descriptions...correspond with their experiences of observing the objects and events in the world” (p. 2), Stiles is privileging observational experience over theoretical experience, as well as suggesting that observation is a separate sort of experience—hence the need for increasing correspondence with it. Yet, it is not obvious why this privileging and separating is justified. Although it is true that the philosophy of empiricism is often accepted in psychology without question or examination, it is also true that there is no empirical evidence for the epistemology of empiricism. Some will undoubtedly claim that empiricism has been the most successful epistemology, but where has this epistemology been scientifically compared to other epistemologies? And what epistemology would we use to effect this comparison?

### ***Conclusion***

Our presentation of these conceptual problems is not intended to discount general dualism or Stiles particular brand of this ontology. We are only too aware that other epistemologies and ontologies have their own problems. Our desire here is to show that a dualist ontology is not unchallengeable. It is not, in a sense, *the* approach to science and theory-building; it is only *one* approach to these endeavors, with its own set of problems like *any* epistemology or ontology. Again, our major thrust is that we should identify these points of view so that they can be evaluated. The special difficulty with dualism is that it is so familiar and so pervasive, especially through the logical positivism of traditional science (Fishman, 1999), that it is often considered axiomatic. Why else would a scholar with Stiles' credentials not identify his approach *as* an approach?

Our experience, however, is that merely pointing to a few problems is rarely effective in battling this axiomatic status. A true alternative is necessary, an alternative that provides a rival approach to "correction" and theory-building. Consequently, we briefly outline an alternative here in the form of a case-study program outside of psychology—*Consumer Reports* car ratings. By all accounts, this program has been quite successful, so it might function in the "rival" role we need to facilitate the identification and recognition of philosophical points of view in the theory-building enterprise. We also return to psychological case studies to apply some of the "lessons" of this program.

### **A NONDUALIST ALTERNATIVE**

*Consumer Reports* has a long history of a widely praised "case study" program that gauges the quality of particular cars (among other things). We propose to undertake here a brief description of the conceptual underpinnings of this popular program.

We should note at the outset that *Consumer Reports* (CR) regularly characterizes its car ratings as "unbiased." This characterization would seem, at first blush, to fit with a dualist approach to car investigations. The dualist would want investigators to strive to eliminate as many subjective biases as possible, so that only the objective truth of the cars would remain. For this reason, the dualist would want CR investigators to eliminate CR's own values and biases, among other subjective items, because subjective values and biases would presumably distort the investigators' "corrective experiences" of the cars themselves in their pristine objectivity.

A closer look at CR's car rating program, however, reveals that they do nothing of the sort. When CR claims to be unbiased, it refers to the appearance of undue influence. Specifically, it takes no revenue or samples from car-makers because it fears that consumers will wonder whether its ratings are influenced by financial considerations. In a sense, CR's fears could be the result of prominent dualist understandings of their ratings, and thus consumer anxieties about subjective biases.

Still, in no way does CR attempt to eliminate or even minimize its "subjective" values in formulating its measurement of cars. CR's rating system, like all rating systems, presumes a moral framework to formulate their criteria for devising the rating system. For example, CR

values things like reliability, drivability, and owner satisfaction, but they put an even greater premium on safety. CR's car ratings, in this sense, are partially constituted by CR's biases and values. We say "partially" because the cars themselves are an important part of the rating; the functioning of the cars influences whether they get high or low ratings.

Nevertheless, these ratings—as helpful as they may be for understanding cars—are not a mere description or “map” of the cars. A different set of values would lead to a *completely different* set of car ratings. For example, if another rating organization did not value safety at all, some cars ranked at the bottom of the CR “safety-first” list might now appear at the top of the other organization's ratings. The two rating organizations could even evaluate the *exact* same set of cars but reach an entirely different set of car rankings, just because different values guided the ratings. This means that values are a vital constituent of ratings; ratings do not exist without them.

### ***Dualism and the Truth of Car Ratings***

The inherent value-ladenness of such ratings—their “subjective objectiveness”—raises the question: how would a dualist evaluate or correct errors in such ratings? How would the truth of the cars themselves be protected in these ratings? The answer is that dualistic approaches would formulate methods that attempt to move the ratings to greater objectivity. In other words, the main goal is to move *closer* to the objective world of the cars and *farther* from the subjective world of beliefs and values.

The problem with this dualistic approach is that there is never a time in which the car ratings are closer or farther from this subjective world, because they always require values to even exist. The dualist might say that the truth is approximated when our subjective beliefs *correspond* with the objective world. The problem, again, is that no ratings exist in the objective world to correspond with. The cars are necessary to the ratings, of course, but they are never sufficient alone to account for the ratings. The cars exist in the ratings only insofar as the cars are revealed by the values of safety and drivability.

From this perspective, the truth of the car ratings can never be “objective” or “unbiased” in the sense that they pertain *only* or even *more* to this objective world. Even the ratings lack of financial dependence on the car-makers does not make them any less dependent on the value-laden criteria used to rate the cars. This financial independence may help us to put more trust in the *criteria* or values used as well as the tests that embody those values. However, this independence does not make the ratings any less value-laden or bring us any closer to some sort of value-free, objective world.

The dualist might attempt to avoid the ratings all together and try to access the different “worlds” that form the truth of the ratings. Perhaps if the individual subjective and objective worlds that supposedly make up the ratings could be evaluated for their truthfulness, then the ratings could be evaluated? This tack assumes that the values and cars themselves, the supposed subjectivities and objectivities of this example, are subject to a dualistic approach to truth. Each world, in this sense, would need to be evaluated for its proximity or correspondence to the objective world.

For example, how true to the objective world are CR's values? If these values are inherently subjective, and thus unrelated to the objective world—by definition of their separation from this world—then the dualist cannot evaluate the truthfulness of the subjective because it can never be closer to or farther from objective reality, in principle. This is part of the reason that objective science never attempts to evaluate moral systems; they are thought to be unrelated to the objective world.

But is this true in the case of CR's values? What could the specific value of "drivability" mean, except in its relation to cars? This specific CR value *comes from* as much as it is *applied to* the world of cars. The value of safety, though not unique to cars, is nevertheless related to our experience with fast-moving, death-dealing modes of transportation. That is to say, CR's value of safety *matters* because of the nature of cars and our relation to them. In this sense, it is difficult to understand CR's values as *unrelated* to the cars. For this reason, these values have a status not unlike the ratings, neither subjective nor objective but some combination of the two.

What about the cars themselves? From a dualist's position the cars make up the objective, material things to which everything truthful about the ratings should correspond. This implies that the cars are unrelated in some original sense to the values CR uses to evaluate them. But is this true? Aren't car-makers attempting to formulate cars that fit the values of car-buyers? Weren't cars invented and shaped, in fact, because of the values of the people who wanted them? If this is true—that cars themselves cannot be fully understood except in relation to values—then even the so-called objective portion of the car ratings is not wholly objective.

At this point, we could conclude that the car ratings are meanings "all the way down," as Held (2007) puts it (e.g., p. 283). That is, they are inextricably interpreted realities—subjective objectivities or meanings—with neither the "subjective" nor the "objective" separable from one another. This nondualist position is what some call *hermeneutic realism* or *ontological relationality*—that the world consists of relational meanings rather than self-contained objects (Bernstein, 1983; Fishman, 1999; Richardson, et al., 1999; Messer, Sass & Woolfolk, 1988; Packer & Addison, 1989; Slife, 2004). If this position is true, then we believe that Held is right about dualist notions of truth—they would not work. Meanings are inherently different critters than either mere objects or mere subjects, and thus do not fit within the dualist paradigm, either for understanding truth or for evaluating it. The French sociologist Bourdieu calls this world of meanings a "third way" (Polkinghorne, 2004, p. 48).

Does this third way mean that there is no truth in meanings? After all, there is nothing objective with which to compare the ratings. Must we conclude, to use Held's (2007) words, that meanings, in this sense, are merely "a matter of what anyone (or everyone) in a certain discursive/interpretive/linguistic community . . . says or believes" they are? (p. 233). This conclusion is tempting because meanings are so often considered "subjective," and thus not truthful by definition from the dualist perspective. Still, as CR and many car consumers will attest, the truthfulness of car ratings is not only an important issue but also possible to evaluate. How, then, does CR arrive at these practical evaluations of truth if the meanings involved do not fit the requirements of a dualist approach?

### ***Truth as Disclosure***

The answer, we believe, lies in alternative, *nondualist* notions of truth—such as truth as disclosure (e.g., Gadamer, 1989) and pragmatic approaches to truth (e.g., Fishman, 1999). Daniel Fishman (1999) does an excellent job describing the latter; we will focus here on the former. This disclosure approach to truth does not depend on any proximity to the objective world, and so it does not need to excise the biases, values, and “subjective” aspects of meanings. Rather, the core idea of the disclosure approach is that some hidden meaning has come to light; it’s been disclosed or faithfully presented. Instead of attempting to eliminate the subjective values and biases that supposedly distort our study of the value-free, objective world, values and biases are considered necessary to illuminate certain important aspects of the phenomenon of study.

For example, a value-free, objective evaluation of a car (in the dualist’s sense) would never reveal or disclose the safety of the car. Conventional scientific instruments and scientific observations, such as through a microscope, might tell us many things about cars, but they could *never* disclose a car’s safety or drivability. To disclose these meanings, one must devise procedures for evaluation that embody these values, such as crash tests. In other words, *the values themselves are necessary for the car to disclose this meaning*; values and cars cannot be understood apart from one another in arriving at a meaningful truth. As Heidegger (1926/1962) put it, disclosure takes place *within* our concerns and involvements with the world, not *outside* them.

This inextricable relationship between values and things implies an important contrast between the two approaches to truth—the dualist approach works toward greater disengagement from values, while a disclosure approach works toward greater engagement. The dualist mode of inquiry and evaluation moves toward greater detachment, less subjectivity or bias, and more objectivity in the sense of closer to the objective world. Contrast this disengagement approach with Charles Taylor’s (1989) delightful rendition of an engagement approach:

when we see something surprising, or something which disconcerts us, or which we can’t quite see, we normally react by setting ourselves to look more closely; we alter our stance, perhaps rub our eyes, concentrate, and the like. Rather than disengaging, we throw ourselves more fully into the experience, as it were. There is a kind of search which involves being “all there”, being more attentively ‘in’ our experience” (p. 163).

Truth in this disclosure sense works toward deeper engagement and more personal involvement with value-laden experience. As we will see, however, this approach does not throw caution to the wind in an “anything goes” or relativistic sense. It implies, instead, an active and careful use of value-laden frameworks. Its insistence on awareness and explication of value-laden frameworks is not an attempt to eliminate them, or an attempt to embrace all values without question. Rather, it is an attempt to see more clearly the relationships between value, theory, and observation.

### ***A Faithful Presentation***

How, then, do we know the truthfulness of this disclosure? What makes it a *faithful* presentation, or even a “corrected” one, to use Stiles’ term (this issue, p. 10), of the meanings

involved? First, as we have argued, no rating or measurement process, including the evaluation of truthfulness itself, can proceed without a moral (value-laden) framework. Indeed, the disengaged, dualist approach to this evaluation also contains an implicit moral system, with such values as “thou shalt be objective” and “thou shalt strive to eliminate all biases.” One could say that a dualist values being as value-free as possible. It follows, then, from this disengagement morality that truth is found in a closer proximity to the objective world.

By contrast, an engaged, disclosure evaluation of truthfulness presupposes an entirely different moral framework. Truth from this perspective is more about relationships and meanings than individuals and objects (Slife, 2004; Slife & Richardson, 2008), as the car ratings and even the cars and values themselves have illustrated. The contrast between Greek and Hebrew notions of *knowing* makes this point. Whereas the ancient Greeks viewed knowing as primarily abstracted from values and contexts, the ancient Hebrews construed knowing as primarily relational, with intimacy as its highest form. The end or faithful presentation of knowledge and truth, in Taylor’s (2002) words, is “being able in some way to function together with the partner” (p. 128). Nondualist truths, in this sense, include personal involvement and meaningful relationships. They are inextricably connected to other truths, rather than self-contained, impersonal, monadic events that are better observed in a laboratory.

This connection is also the reason that nondualist understandings of truth are revisable and not final—they can change with a change in context. Returning to our car example, the Toyota Camry has long been the epitome of automobile reliability. Recently, however, the reliability of the V-6 Camry has faltered. This change in reliability rating could be in relation to either our understanding of reliability or our understanding of the Camry (or both). The point is, one can never be complacent about truth or a faithful presentation from a disclosure perspective. Only in a dualist approach, where truth resides in a fixed and abstracted objective world, can truth be unchangeable (Slife & Richardson, 2008). This view of knowledge and truth as abstracted from subjectivity may also be the reason that Stiles (this issue) insists on achieving “stable” meanings of signs (p. 12), even after acknowledging that such stability is “at variance with natural language” (p. 8). He may see the ultimate knowledge and truth of case histories to be unchanging and abstracted from the everyday situations of living, because he suggests that more stable signs (abstractions) would lead to better theories.

In a faithful presentation, however, the malleability of a sign (in relation to a changeable context) may *increase* its usefulness in a theory. The term “reliability” remains useful in *Consumer Reports* partly because our understanding of the term is continuously modified in relation to the changing contexts and cultures of automobile performance. Many conceptions of automobile reliability from decades ago would be of little use today. Rating the reliability of a carburetor, for example, is decreasingly useful, in part because the context of car engines has changed.

In this sense, lived or practical truth is not fixed, because it is partly constituted by frequently changing contexts and not abstracted from them as an objective world supposes. We realize that this property of meaningful truth may feel a bit counterintuitive, given the predominance of the dualist framework, but it amounts to little more than the simple and practical maxim: “take circumstances into account when deciding truth.” Most often, for

instance, we should not steal someone's bread, but occasionally, as in the circumstances of the book *Les Misérables*, it is the right and truthful thing to do. A faithful presentation of a meaning, in this sense, can never be separated from the moral context in which it occurs.

## APPLICATION TO STILES' ASSIMILATION MODEL

Stiles (this issue) offers a useful illustration of his philosophy in a 2003 article, which is reprinted as Appendix A in Stiles article (this issue). In this section, we focus on what Stiles calls his "assimilation model," to contrast the more practical applications of the dualist and nondualist philosophies of case study. Two familiar assumptions are evident in Stiles (2003) at the outset. First, he assumes that observations should be the ground from which fruitful theory grows, and second, he assumes an empiricist epistemology in his approach to truth. We show how these assumptions pervade both his assimilation model and his description of theory building. We then discuss the problems these assumptions present for even his *own* model. Finally, we provide examples for how a non-dualist disclosure approach can avoid these problems.

### *Observation*

Stiles' 2003 article is clear that observation grounds and corrects theory. Specifically, he asserts that, "Scientific research compares ideas with observations. In good research, the ideas are thereby changed" (p. 6). With this statement, Stiles seems to hold that there is something in the world of observation that can be accessed independently of the world of ideas—that can inform ideas without being informed by them. As we described earlier, this appears to create a separation of the world of ideas from the world of "concrete objects and events," as Stiles puts it (p. 6)—thus creating the need to seek "correspondence" (p. 7). Implicit in this distinction is the notion that the world of observations—independent to some degree of the world of ideas—is somehow more objective or free of biases or values.

Stiles (2003) does give occasionally voice to the more experiential, "dependent" side of observation. He talks about observations as unique *experiences*, as in "people experience...events differently" (p. 6) and we should "place observations in context rather than in isolation" (p. 7). Observations, from these quotes, could be interpreted as mainly, if not wholly, subjective. However, true to his grounding assumption, Stiles also writes as if observations are *events*, as in "observed events" (p. 7) and events "produce" observations (p. 6), in which case observations are mainly, if not wholly, objective. Which is it? Are observations subjective experiences or objective events? This question goes to the heart of whether observations have the power to ground the theories of researchers.

Stiles might reply that observations are merely *more* objective than other subjective experiences. However, if observations are objective *at all*, and thus independent of our theories and values to *any* degree, then it is to *that degree* that they are dualist and our criticisms about dualism follow. If they are not objective to *any* degree—i.e., they are thoroughly integrated with a person's own theories and values, however conscious—then what gives these "observations" the power to ground and correct theories when prior theories were involved in shaping the observations in the first place?

This pivotal ambiguity pervades Stiles' article, and three important examples illustrate it. First, Stiles (2003) argues that, "case study authors can make their research scientific by articulating their case's detailed relation to an explicit theory" (p. 9). As he puts it, "at issue is how well the theory describes the details of the case" (p. 7). However, what is it, other than a theory, that makes the "details" of a case study *details*? Aren't the details themselves selectively attended to or selectively ignored based on their significance to an implicit or explicit theory? Shouldn't we take into account the theory used to frame these "details" before we use them to form or correct another theory?

As another example, consider how Stiles (2003) describes the assimilation model as being "at the core...an observational strategy: identifying problems and tracking them across sessions, using tape recordings or transcripts" (p. 7). How can we "observe problems" without values or theories to indicate what problems are? Problems do not identify themselves. Is a scream a cry of delight or the pain of anguish? A moral or theoretical framework would be needed to make this identification.

Consider also the significance Stiles (2003) puts on "traumatic events" (p. 8). Do the events themselves have inherent properties that make them traumatic, or does a person's interpretation of trauma play an important role? Here again, if "observed events" or the "details of a case" are considered to be objective, then the problems of dualism follow, but if observations of events are inherently value-laden, then we need to account for more than just the observation. We need to account for the values, implicit theories, and biases that partly comprise the observation. Where are these values discussed and examined in Stiles' assimilation and theory-building models?

### *Empirical Truth*

Stiles' (2003) reliance on observation also leaves him dependent on empiricism as an epistemology. As he puts it, "empirical truth [is] the goal toward which theoretical statements strive" (Stiles, 2003, p. 6). Not surprisingly, however, Stiles encounters the same difficulty conceptualizing empirical truth as he does conceptualizing observation. He envisions empirical truth as "a correspondence between theories and observed events," theories that can be compared with observations and "judged as similar or different" (p. 6). This empirical claim makes complete sense, of course, if theories can be corrected by observations that are not themselves tainted by preconceived values, biases, or theories. If this is what Stiles' means to imply, then again, our criticisms of dualism apply.

Stiles (2003), however, goes on to argue that, "Empirical truth is never general or permanent because different people experience words and events differently, depending on their biological equipment, culture, life history, and current circumstances" (p. 6). If *this* claim is true, then all observation is *inherently* value-laden—never being "general or permanent"—and it is unclear what advantage observation has over other sources of ideas, theories, or truths (e.g., reason). Why must theory correspond to observation, if observation is so infused with cultural, biological, historical, and situational biases, and thus specific and impermanent? What has corrected for these *original* biases? In short, if observation is value-laden, then how is a purely

empirical truth possible? We need something *more* than observation to discern truth; we need a value-laden disclosure of truth.

### *Disclosed Truth*

Disclosure approaches to truth avoid the problems of dualism and empiricism by situating truth in a world of meanings that are inseparable from objects or ideas. From this perspective, a better goal for theory building and case study research is a disclosure of such meanings, rather than a correspondence of theories to observations that have hidden or unarticulated biases. This goal seems more appropriate for inquiry in the social sciences where meanings originate inextricably from the subject of inquiry: human experience. Why borrow an epistemology designed for a world of “concrete objects” (p. 6), only to have to bend it to a world of meanings?

As an example from Stiles’ (2003) own work, consider his notion of a client’s assimilation of “problematic” experiences (p. 8). Such experiences seem to require—in Stiles’ (2003) model—integration, or increasing correspondence with previously integrated experiences. A disclosure approach, however, would view noteworthy experiences, the ways in which they are experienced (e.g. as problematic or beneficial), and the reasons they are even noted, as revealing or disclosing the meanings of each experience. When a client labels an experience “problematic,” certain values are associated with that label. To discover those values, the client might be asked in what sense or context the experience is considered problematic. Is it problematic because something was lost through this experience (perhaps valuing the thing lost more than the experience)? Is it problematic because it resulted in some kind of pain or suffering (perhaps valuing freedom from suffering)? For this reason, multiple aspects of these experiences, from values to observations, should be explicated to more fully understand the meaning.

The words “experience” and “observation” have been used somewhat interchangeably to relate to Stiles’ use of the notion “experienced observation” (see e.g. Stiles, 2003, p. 7). However, from a nondualist, disclosure approach to truth, experiences are far broader than conventional notions of observation. Experiences include all sorts of things that never really fall on our retinas (are observed), such as emotions, thoughts, values, and even spiritual experiences. Perhaps most importantly, meanings do not fall on our retinas. The printed words of a book may fall on our retinas, but the relations among these words—their meanings—do not. Even interpersonal relations, the “betweenness” of people, do not fall on our retinas, and thus are not observational in the conventional sense. Observations alone, disengaged from the broader context of experience, lead us not only *toward* dualism but also *away* from the meanings of which case studies consist.

Dualists, of course, will cast these meanings and values as subjectivities and then help them correspond with objectivities. However, as our deconstruction of Consumer Reports (CR) illustrates, such values and meanings are always and already in relation to our experiences. The CR values of drivability and performance, for example, only make sense in relation to cars, and cars only make sense in relation to our values about modes of transportation. Both are meanings “all the way down,” rather than events or objects in the dualist sense. From the disclosure perspective, the confluence of CR’s values and the cars—CR’s car ratings—is not a subjectivity

corrected by an objectivity; it is the disclosure of the value-laden cars in relation to the car-laden values.

From this perspective, case study researchers and theory builders would not only take notes on value-laden observations but also take notes on their own as well as their clients' value-laden *reasons* for observing the things they observe. In other words, observations would not correct our explicit theories so much as they would *explicate* the implicit, or even unconscious, theories and values that guide our observations. As these implicit values are disclosed, alternative values might be considered. Perhaps there is something in the “problematic” experience, though painful, that could be of great value as well. It may then be discovered that problems and their solutions lie in the values held—or in some combination of a value and its associated observations—rather than in a simple correspondence or assimilation of multiple observations.

A disclosure of values is not in this sense an attempt to discard or control for values. Rather, a disclosure approach assumes that these values tell us not only something about the people who hold them, but also something about the world in which we live. As noted in our CR discussion, CR's values reveal something meaningful and verifiable about the cars to which they are applied. A value of safety, for example, leads us to formulate certain methods (e.g., crash tests) of inquiry, and these methods, in turn, reveal certain truths about a car (e.g., the efficacy of seat belts) that are meaningful in light of that value. Observation alone, without values to structure it, cannot reveal these truths.

Theorists who merely compare their theories with their observations (Stiles' proposal) may never realize their *a priori* or implicit observation-shaping assumptions until alternative assumptions are considered. As many qualitative researchers have taught us (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), it is only when we realize our biases and understand the viability of alternative biases that we can truly allow our conventional biases to be questioned by our experiences (including observations). Otherwise, two theorists observing the same event are liable to only see what fits their implicit assumptions.

Thus, rather than being a method for correcting or improving theory, an attempt at “objective” observation might obscure the very truths we hope to discover. From the perspective of a disclosure approach to truth, a better measure of the goodness of theory might be the level of disclosure apparent in the theory. Have the values of the theorist been disclosed? Has the theorist revealed the position from which they are viewing the case? There are no perspectives outside the system, no views from nowhere (Bishop, 2007). If theorists cannot or will not consider the values that shape their observations, experiences, and theories, how can they be expected to consider alternative, perhaps even better, ways of seeing and understanding the case?

## LESSONS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

What does this disclosure approach to knowledge have to offer us when we attempt to gauge the quality of psychological case studies? As concrete as car ratings obviously are, we realize that this explanation of CR's value-laden approach to case study, and thus “theory-building,” is less than familiar. Consequently, we attempt here to draw a few “lessons” for

psychological case study from our conceptual case study of CR's successful program of case study.

First, there is no "line" to draw between objective and subjective realities because these two categories are never really separated (ontologically). Psychological case studies are inherently value-laden, just as car ratings are inherently value-laden. Psychological cases are perceived and then rendered by human beings in and through their interpreted experience. Case studies are meanings—subjective objectivities—"all the way down." Indeed, the readers of case studies *count* on these inherent values, so that they get the more important features of the case (in a reduced form). No offense to CR, but their investigators—often engineers and technicians—would probably write a completely different psychological case study from those trained in psychology. Being upfront about those values, not to mention the perceiver's worldview concerning human nature and pathology, would help readers to evaluate and even correct a particular rendition of the case.

Second, the subjectivity of this correction is no longer a concern from this disclosure approach because there is no correction, rating, measurement, or evaluation that is not partially "subjective," at least in the sense of being value-laden. Indeed, without values we would have no way to formulate the correction, let alone gauge its results. Values (biases) thus become "vitally important" (Fishman, 1999, p. 170), rather than something to be controlled or eliminated. Just as the value of car safety leads to the formulation of crash tests, so too a clear sense of a flourishing life in psychology leads to the formulation of moral criteria for gauging the quality of case studies. Stiles, on the other hand, propounds no explicit moral criteria in this regard, while advocating an implicit morality of disengagement. We hope we are not belaboring the point when we say that such criteria, along with the philosophies that underlie them, should be explicit.

As a third implication of this alternative approach to case studies, reliance on one particular epistemology, such as Stiles' experiential correspondence, would be considered problematic. Because all epistemologies and methods would be viewed as having their own advantages and disadvantages, depending on the investigation, a pluralism of epistemologies and ontologies would be needed. Just as carpenters have several tools available for the job, so too case study evaluators could have several epistemologies and methods available for evaluating the qualities of case studies (Slife & Wendt, in press; Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005). Indeed, we would want Stiles' own epistemology to be available in this sense.

We close by mentioning briefly two caveats to this sort of pluralism. The first concerns the continuing battle of pluralism to avoid a slide into an "anything goes" relativism. Although we have no space here to develop this first caveat, it is clear that such a slide is not inevitable in case studies (Fishman, 1999). Charles Taylor (1985), for instance, provides examples of case studies that entail both "strong evaluations" and dialogical conceptions that allow for pluralism without nihilistic relativisms (see also Widdershoven, 1992). Our CR illustration is also a case in point of a thoroughly meaning-oriented endeavor that allows us to distinguish safer cars without resorting to some sort of "anything goes" relativism.

Our second caveat is the main thrust of this paper: a thoughtful and meaningful pluralism cannot occur without explicating one's current assumptions and developing alternative

assumptions, so that current assumptions are viewed *as* assumptions. Slife, Reber, and Richardson (2005) devote an entire volume to the explication of these current and alternative assumptions in psychology. Without this recognition of basic values and assumptions—both by the case study author and by the case study evaluator—quality evaluation will be hampered, if not impossible.

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