

## Taking Practice Seriously: Toward a Relational Ontology

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As the title of this paper implies, psychology has not taken practice seriously. This is not to say that psychologists have not been concerned about professional practices or not examined them through empirical research. Indeed, this concern and examination has occupied a major portion of psychology's energies and resources, especially in regard to therapeutic and scientific practices. Rather, taking practice seriously means here considering the unique and radical character of practice, especially when understood as engaged and contextually situated activity (cf. Polkinghorne, 2004). Mainstream psychologists have not only ignored this radical character; they have generally misunderstood it.

As I will argue, a major reason for this ignorance and misunderstanding is mainstream psychology's assumption of a particular ontology – *abstractionism*. An ontology refers to fundamental, taken-for-granted assumptions about the ultimate reality of things. With abstractionism, psychologists have generally assumed that abstractions, such as theories, techniques, and principles, capture and embody the fundamentally real. Most pertinently, abstractions are believed to precede and lay the foundation for good and thoughtful practice. Therapists are supposed to formulate or learn their therapeutic theories and techniques first, and then tailor them to the specific situation at hand. Practice, in this sense, is an extension of the abstractions of theory to the concreteness of a practical situation. Practice has no separate identity of its own because it is merely an application of these abstractions.

The problem is that recent critical examinations of this understanding of practice have questioned its legitimacy and validity (see also Bourdieu, 1980; Certeau, 1980; Polkinghorne, 2004; Richardson, this issue; Westerman, this issue). As Polkinghorne (2004) noted in his review of practice, social science research has generally found that actual practice does not issue from the conscious and rational calculations of theory. It originates, instead, from non-deliberative, background understandings that are embedded in our cultures and relationships. In this sense, practices are more pre-theoretical than theoretical, more concrete than abstract (Richardson, this issue; Taylor, 1995; Westerman, this issue).

This reconceptualization of practice has prompted an unprecedented questioning of the ontological assumptions of many disciplines (cf. Bordieu, 1980; Gunton, 1993; Holland et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 2004; Rorty, 1979; Turner, 1994). Because practices are inextricably intertwined with their concrete contexts and cultures, they cannot be abstracted from them. If, for instance, you ask experts a theoretical question, their answers draw on abstract principles, often without much qualification. If, however, you ask experts a *practical* question, an onslaught of “it depends” statements cascades from their lips. These statements evidence the importance of the concrete relational, because what is ontologically real and has being *in practice* cannot be understood apart from its relations to other aspects of the context. Indeed, practices do not *exist*, in an important ontological sense, except in relation to the concrete and particular situations and cultures that give rise to them, implying what we might call a *relational ontology*.

The purpose of this article is to explore the possible meanings and implications of a relational ontology for psychology. I first attempt to clarify the important features of

relational conceptions in general, distinguishing most importantly between their weak and strong forms. Then, I situate strong or ontological relationality historically by describing its initial embrace and eventual rejection by early scientists. To bring these historical lessons into the present, ontological relationality is next compared to the abstractionist understandings of the real and fundamental in mainstream psychology. These two forms of ontology are then illustrated by exploring their contrasting implications for individual and community identity.

### *Clarifying Relationality*

Conceptions of relationality can be placed into two main categories, weak and strong. The weak form of relationality is already well incorporated into psychology, manifested as it is in the internalization of “outside” influences of all types. From this weak relational perspective, persons, places, and things (as well as practices) begin and end as self-contained individualities that often take in information from the outside. Relationships and practices in this weak sense are reciprocal exchanges of information among essentially self-contained organisms. The term “interaction” often connotes this weak form of relationality because members of the interaction “act on” each other from the outside, with their qualities and practices depending on what kind and how much of this interactional information is incorporated into the self. In all cases, the identity of these entities stems from what is ultimately “inside” and within them, even if some of what is inside might have originated from the outside. Weak relationality, then, is ultimately a type of individualism or atomism.

Strong relationality, by contrast, is an ontological relationality. Relationships are not just the interactions of what was originally nonrelational; relationships are relational

“all the way down.” Things are not first self-contained entities and then interactive.

Each thing, including each person, is first and always a nexus of relations. A simple stick figure illustrates such a nexus because the “circle” at the top of the figure is only a “head” by virtue of its relation to the remainder of the figure. Removing the figure’s legs, for instance, changes the stick figure to a symbol for a female, with the “circle” losing its headness in the process.

From a strong relational perspective, all things, including all practices, have a shared being and a mutual constitution in this sense. They start out and forever remain in relationship. Their very qualities, properties, and identities cannot stem completely from what is inherent or “inside” them but must depend on how they are related to each other. The outside is as important as the inside. Practices are probably a person’s most important form of this strong relating, because practices require a relationship not only with our surroundings but also with our prior actions and the actions of others. Playing tennis, for example, requires not only a particular melding of the racket with my arm motion but also a particular positioning of my body (before the swing) in relation to my opponent and the desired ball placement. Good tennis players do this swinging and positioning almost without conscious thought. The racket is not a detached thing that players consciously manipulate at every moment but is instead part of a whole pattern of action (arm + racket + position).

From a weak relational perspective, such objects are thought to be “objective” because they transcend their relations to their concrete situations and supposedly retain their identities across all contexts. A tennis racket is a tennis racket, whether it is used for fire wood or returning a serve. However, from a strong relational perspective, weak

relationality is only secondarily relational because it omits the shared being of all things. Objectification can only occur through abstraction. The objects must be abstracted from their concrete contexts, because in their fundamental realness – in their practical and concrete realities – all things are ontologically related to their context and can qualitatively change as their contexts change. If a person dying of frigid temperatures, for instance, discovers a cache of wooden tennis rackets, the rackets *are* firewood. Only an abstraction from this deadly situation allows the person to identify the fuel that provides life-giving warmth as something used in a game. All things, in this sense, are concretely dependent upon, rather than independent of, their contexts.

#### *General Implications*

This shared concreteness of being has some rather provocative, general implications. Unlike weak relationality, where essentially self-contained objects must cross time and space to influence one another through traditional cause and effect, strong relationality assumes that objects are instantaneously or even simultaneously present with other objects. They are not only influential but also constitutive of the very nature of beings or events. In physics, this is sometimes known as action-at-a-distance, because influences occur without material contact. Indeed, as Bell's theorem demonstrates, physical particles can be instantaneously related – as parts of a larger whole – even though they are light years apart (Wolf, 1981). Disturbance of one particle simultaneously disturbs the other. Similarly, Einstein's theory of relativity, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and Bohr's quantum mechanics all require the strong relationality of the observer and the observed.

In the social sciences, the ontological status of a spoken accent is probably prototypical of the ultimate reality of all things for the strong relationist. You recognize the practice of a West Texas accent (with the spoken “West” having two “syllables”) only because of its contrasting relationship to your own accent. In other words, accents only exist in simultaneous relation to other accents. Likewise, little Billy’s activity level in class – a type of practice – is only noticed and eventually diagnosed as ADHD because of his contrasting relationship with the activity level of his peers. Little Billy is not first active, as a self-contained trait, and only later contrasted with his passive peers. His activity level is partly constituted by his peers, as he partly constitutes their passivity. The action-at-a-distance of physics, in this sense, is an ongoing and never-ending mutual influence. No conventional conception of cause and effect is necessary or even helpful in explaining these influences because they do not cross time and space. That is, these influences do not require before and after and they do not require material contact.

### *Historical Context*

Partly because of this skirting of conventional causality, time, and space, relational and instantaneous action-at-a-distance has been historically considered unreal and unscientific. Indeed, an overlooked factor in the rise of classical physical science is its move away from such strong relational influences. Many historians now consider one version of strong relationality – the cosmology and ontology of Renaissance magic – as one of the chief rivals of science for replacing the Aristotelian, teleological worldview. As Easlea (1980) puts it,

“‘modern science’ emerged, at least in part, out of a three-cornered contest between proponents of the established [Aristotelian-Thomistic] view and

adherents of newly prospering magical cosmologies, both to be opposed in the seventeenth century by advocates of revived mechanical world views” (p. 89).

Actually, the magical-spiritualist tradition in the early sixteenth century consisted of two main branches, those practicing Cabalistic or spiritual magic and those practicing Hermetic or natural magic (Griffin, 2000). The first and perhaps most typical of this tradition, the Cabalistic, was clearly relational in its emphasis on the ontological connections and simultaneous influences among things. Just as strong relationality does not require material contact and the crossing of time and space, spiritual and magical relations (e.g., telepathy) were viewed similarly. The purpose of Cabalistic magic was to manipulate these unconventional relations for the good of humankind.

However, these magicians were eventually accused of invoking not only good spirits but also demonic and evil spirits (Yates, 1978). Many magicians subsequently emphasized that they practiced only natural Hermetic magic, which implied a significant move away from relationality. Hermetic magic involved the manipulation of the natural powers *inherent* and *self-contained* in things<sup>1</sup> – e.g., their “sympathies” and “antipathies.” Significantly, medicine was derived from this natural magic tradition, concerned, as it is even today, with ridding people of inherent and self-contained badnesses called diseases (Viney & King, 1998).

This movement toward the more natural forms of Hermetic magic can be viewed as part of the transition toward and eventual triumph of an abstractionist ontology, where all matter was eventually considered to be self-contained and thus abstracted from its

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<sup>1</sup> Hence, the contemporary notion that “hermetically sealed” means self-contained and not influenced by outside forces.

surrounding context and relations to other things.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, many of the great scientists of this era struggled with this transition from magical-relational to abstractionist-material. Even “the great Newton” was significantly involved in the magical tradition, seeing more than a metaphorical affinity among all forms of action-at-a-distance, including telepathy, gravity, healing-at-a-distance, and magnetism (Manuel, 1968). In fact, some historians, such as Hugh Kearney (1971), classify Newton as “the great amphibian” to stress his allegiance to both the magical and abstractionist traditions. As historian, Frank Manuel (1968), notes, “Newton lived in an animistic world in which feelings of love and attraction could be assimilated to forces” (p. 85).

Perhaps surprisingly, the greatest influence away from the magical-spiritual tradition was the theology of this era (Klaaren, 1977; Griffin, 2000). Many religious scholars felt that this tradition diminished God’s influences because it assumed all things mutually influenced one another through their constitutive relatedness. Calvin, Scotus, and Occam were just a few of these scholars who viewed a transcendent God as the agent of influence and change. If this was true, they reasoned, then the things of the world would possess no influence or self-motion of their own. Motion and change would be caused from outside the concrete and relational context, and the events of nature would be due entirely to the imposed laws or will of God, putting the final nail in the magical-relational coffin. As the scientist Boyle (1744) put it during this period:

“[S]ince motion does not essentially belong to matter . . . the motions of all bodies, at least the beginnings of things . . . were impressed upon them, either by

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<sup>2</sup> In this scheme, materialism – where the real is the material – is a subcategory of an abstractionist ontology because the notion of “material” is an abstraction rather than a concrete particular of experience.

an external immaterial agent, God; or by other portions of matter (which are also extrinsical impellers) acting upon them (p. 394).

Newton went even further, using the notion of inert and self-contained matter to “prove” the existence of God (Griffin, 2000, p. 119). After showing that inertia is merely a passive principle (as implied by the “inert” of the label “inertia”), he says: “By this Principle alone there never could have been any Motion in the World. Some other Principle was necessary for putting Bodies into Motion” (Koyre’, 1957, p. 216).

### *Conceptual Problems*

The historical legacy of this transition from strong relational influence to self-contained inertness is a number of well known conceptual problems, from the free will/determinism controversy to the mind/body problem. For example, if self-motion or an influencing power is unavailable to natural bodies, then personal agency and free will are extremely unlikely in humans. In other words, if all motion is caused by, to use Boyle’s words, “an external agent,” then no natural being can internally cause their own motion, including a person agentically causing their own behavior. For this reason, the move away from the relationality of magic helped to spawn the free will/determinism controversy: all natural bodies are determined by outside forces and yet one such natural body, the human, routinely experiences itself as having at least a modicum of free will.

The mind-body problem is also an historical legacy of this self-containment ontology. Descartes, for example, was quite clear about the passivity and nonmagical nature of matter. As he put it,

“there exist no occult forces in stones or plants, no amazing and marvelous sympathies and antipathies, in fact there exists nothing in the whole of nature

which cannot be explained in terms of purely corporeal causes, totally devoid of mind and thought” (Easlea, p. 111).

The problem was that the activity and agency of the mind was difficult to explain in terms of the machinations of inert matter. Ruling out the strong relationality of matter, Descartes had to postulate some sort of immateriality of the mind, with the mind/body problem as a result. Interestingly, Descartes handled other action-at-a-distance phenomena, such as gravity, through the postulation of inert material vortices or what Christiaan Huygens called “fluid matter” (Easlea, 1980, p. 122). Still, as Plato taught, the soul or mind is a self-moving thing (Griffin, 2000, p. 123). Consequently, the self-moving agency of the human mind meant to Descartes that no inert material would do, making his explanation of the mind necessarily immaterial and thus fantastic to many contemporary neuroscientists.

Moreover, because all things were not viewed as mutually constitutive, Descartes and Western science had to account for the interaction of an ontologically independent mind and body – materiality and immateriality. Many modern neuroscientists have attempted to solve the mind/body problem by denying the Cartesian mind and contending that only the material counts in science (cf. Slife & Hopkins, 2005). However, as neuroscientist Dawson Hedges admits, this denial has many problematic consequences (Hedges & Burchfield, in press). For example, the mind survives in that the very activity of the scientist who claims to have explained it away actually *presupposes* the existence of purposive, creative *mental* activity. Another consequence concerns the dramatic increase in the popularity of all that is mechanistically biological, such as the taking of drugs for virtually everything.

The upshot is that the rejection of this magical brand of relationism led to myriad conceptual problems for the contemporary psychologist and neuroscientist (cf. Slife, Reber, & Richardson, in press). When the natural relations among things were denied, all the obvious and not so obvious relations among things had to be accounted for – the relations between mind and body, between agent and physical law, between person and culture, and between therapist and client, to name just a few. Although there is perhaps good reason to avoid the animism of the magical tradition, the relational baby was historically thrown out with the animistic bath water.

Contemporary strong relationality and the action-at-a-distance of modern physics do not rely on magic; they rely on a different ontology – a different understanding of what is real. In this view of nature, the fundamentally real is not an inert matter that requires direct outside contact for its motion. The fundamentally real is a part of a larger whole in which its very properties and being stem from its relation to other parts. Could such a relational ontology begin to solve some of the problems spawned by the abandonment of the magical relational tradition and the adoption of the self-containment-abstractionist worldview? What are its implications for the engaged and situated activities of psychological practices?

### *Comparing Ontologies*

These questions cannot be answered without first directly comparing strong relationality to the dominant ontology of modern psychology – abstractionism. Both ontological frameworks would accept Peter Berger's (1977) notion that humans have an ability to abstract themselves from the everyday experience of reality. Still, we move away from a simple ability for abstraction and move toward the assertion of an

abstractionist *ontology* when we assume, however unknowingly, that these abstractions are the most fundamental level of being and reality. As Heidegger (1962), Taylor (1985), Toulmin (1972), and many others have argued (e.g., Gadamer, 1995; Guignon, 1993), abstractionist ontologies have dominated our Western intellectual consciousness, often without recognition, for several centuries.

As described, psychology's dependence on theories, ethical codes, methodological principles, and therapeutic techniques are just a few of the many manifestations of this kind of Western consciousness (Polkinghorne, 2004). Still, many psychologists have supported these manifestations without knowing their ontological basis (cf. Slife & Williams, 1995). Therefore, it is important to identify and distinguish the main features of these two ontologies so that they can be evaluated and their implications examined. I begin to distinguish them here by describing how abstractionist frameworks are considered to be contextless, atomistic, and thin, whereas relational frameworks are contextual, holistic, and thick.

*Contextless.* Abstractions are typically understood as *contextless* because they are separate from and presumably transcend the particular contexts of everyday experience (Bohman, 1993). This feature is, in fact, the main appeal of abstractions such as theories, principles, and beliefs. They are thought to avoid ties to particular experiences and thus supposedly applicable to many or all experiences. This applicability also connotes the receptivity of an abstractionist to a weak relational understanding of practice, where an organism supposedly tailors abstractions to specific situations and generally exchanges information with "outside" people or events. These exchanges and this applicability are only a weak and not an ontological or strong relationality because abstract conceptions

have priority, occurring first and waiting to be extended to the particulars of a situation. Truth itself is frequently understood in these terms as a set of abstract propositions in this sense – as something embodied and conveyed in applicable principles and beliefs (Gadamer, 1995; Slife, 1999a; 1999b; 2004).

*Atomistic.* Abstractions also fit nicely into the historical legacy of self-containment or *atomism*, along with the essential independence of subjectivity and objectivity, mind and body. Just as atoms have been historically considered to contain their own properties, without a defining reference to the surrounding context, so too the subjective mind is considered to contain its own properties, without a defining reference to its surrounding context. Indeed, the mind's capacity to abstract itself from the particulars of contexts is often viewed as a major reason for its atomism, and thus its independence from the body and "objective world." In this sense, most abstractions such as theories, principles, and beliefs are thought to be self-contained subjectivities that are separate from the objectivities of the real world.

Subjectifications and objectifications are both abstractions, in this sense, because they are abstracted or removed from one another (Taylor, 1985). To objectify something, for instance, is to make it into an object that is essentially the same, regardless of its subjective (living or meaningful) context. It must be stripped of any particulars – any rich and changeable contextual qualities as well as any intrinsic or defining relations with other objects. The notion of "substance," for example, is an objectivity that abstractly constitutes all the tables of the world, but it cannot be identified with any particular table. Similarly, subjectifications are usually the way we understand beliefs and theories; they

supposedly transcend the world “out there” and thus are atomistic because they can exist only in the self-contained mind.

*Thinness.* The trouble is that this transcending of the particular world also makes beliefs and theories *thin*. They are thin because they attain their universal status and applicability only by abstracting away from the particular, the everyday, and the unique. As a result they are notoriously impractical in coping with our ever so particular, changing, and surprise-filled world (Dueck, 1995). An abstraction is thus a reduction. It must omit many details that could be important to a rich or thick sense of the relations or meanings involved. From a strong relational position, meanings themselves are relationships, and because all things, including meanings, are best understood as relationally tied to other things, any loss of detail (and thus relations) is an impoverishment, if not a distortion, of the meanings themselves.

This discussion of thinness may raise an important question about ontological relationality: Isn't a description of strong relationality, such as this article, itself a reduction or thinness? Here, strong relationalists acknowledge the linguistic reduction of any description/articulation (Levinas, 1987; Polkinghorne, 2004; cf. Slife & Williams, 1995). Language is necessarily abstract and impoverished, in this sense, especially in comparison to the richness of practice or lived experience. However, relational ontologists do not take their *description* of concrete relational experience to be the fundamentally real. They take the rich and detailed practices and experiences *themselves* as the fundamentally real.

Therefore, in studying and describing practices and experiences ontological relationalists strive for thickness over thinness. Although each particular lived experience

is unique in its qualities, these unique qualities are a nexus of the experience's relation to the whole, including the experienced past (Slife, 1993). In this sense, the nexus is rich and thick with contextual and historical relations,<sup>3</sup> and subjectivity and objectivity are inextricably intertwined as interpreted reality (meaning). These practical, lived experiences also cannot be atomistic because each experience is holistically related to other particular contextual relations.

### *Implications for Individual Identity*

Perhaps the most frequently discussed implication of the abstractionist and relationist ontologies concerns the issue of individual identity or the self (e.g., Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). As is well known from the work of Bellah et al. (1985), Gadamer (1995), and others, an abstractionist ontology yields what Taylor (1985) calls the "punctual self" (p. 7), with the self conceived as a kind of isolated point of consciousness and will, separated from and standing over against its context. Identity and uniqueness are thus gained essentially through internalized and thus abstracted subjective beliefs and values. These beliefs and values may be political, professional, or religious in nature, but the most basic way to distinguish one's self in much of Western culture, given this prevalent abstractionist ontology, is through the uniqueness of these thin abstractions or ideas.

For this reason, self-contained individuals do not require other persons for their identity, even in their practices, resulting in the individualistic living that Bellah and others have long criticized (cf. Gunton, 1993; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999).

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<sup>3</sup> I separate contextual and historical here for emphasis. However, I consider the contextual to necessarily include the historical and vice versa.

The abstractionist motto for identity is: “I am who I am regardless of who you are.” Indeed, individual integrity and selfhood are frequently viewed as unchangeability (or stability) in relation to changing persons and changing contexts: “John is honest all the day long.” For this reason, a person’s personality is often equated with cross-situational traits and characteristics (cf. Rychlak, 1981).

By contrast, the relationist motto for identity has to be contextual: “I am who I am, in part, because of who you are.” As mentioned, the relationist identity allows for individual uniqueness, but it does so through a distinct nexus of relationships rather than a distinct set of beliefs and values. Abstract beliefs and values exist and are important to individual living, but they are not ontologically fundamental and thus not fundamental to individual identity. Instead, as Bourdieu (1980) has described, practices are the individual’s main way of relating, with beliefs and values secondary to and serving the relation we have with others.

Because others are so important to our individual identities in a strong relationality, it is important to understand the status of the “other” in this ontology. No belief or value can serve the other in this relational arrangement unless the other is allowed to truly *be* “other,” in all of his or her singularity and difference. In other words, no real relationship is possible if the other is merely a reflection or even a conception of the self. There must be something beyond subjectivity and the self, or the whole of the interpersonal relationship is without its parts (Gadamer, 1995). Even our conceptions or beliefs about others do not capture them. To put it in the terms of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1987), the other cannot be “totalized” (Kunz, 2002, p. 124).

Otherwise, there is no one with whom to have a relationship, and our own identity is jeopardized because it requires this relationship.

### *Implications for Community Identity*

Although individual identity is perhaps the most discussed implication of these two ontologies, their implications for community identity are more helpful for illustrating and understanding their differences. Part of the reason is that practices are thought to be embedded in various types of communities – from communities with only the most superficial ties, such as the people of a subway commute, to communities that attempt to establish the most fundamental connections, such as the members of a committed political movement or religious body. Because ontologies are concerned with the most fundamental level of all things, those communities that attempt to establish the most fundamental connections – what we might call *communities of depth* – often reveal the most salient differences between abstractionist and relational ontological frameworks.

In the following sections, I compare these ontologies on three basic questions for communities of depth: What is the main task of such a community? What is the primary threat to a depth community? And what are the main practices in which each ontological framework for community attempts to meet that threat? The answers to these questions illustrate not only this ontological contrast but also many of the differing moral implications of these ontologies. Similar to any philosophy, ontologies imply or assume a basic ethical or moral framework. Consideration of the tasks, threats, and protections of a community will necessarily involve this implicit framework.

*The Main Task of Community*

*Abstractionist.* From an abstractionist ontology, communities of depth are communities of belief. That is, if fundamental unity is sought, then this ontological framework implies that unity occurs through common abstractions, such as opinions, theories, principles, values, and beliefs. Because abstractions are the most real and fundamental entities, fundamental unity requires their commonality. Furthermore, this ontology implies that abstractions are a likely source of any *disunity*. Because abstractions are not essentially related to their surrounding contexts and are thus self-contained in the mind, they are individual and potentially unique. Anyone who might want to be part of the community could have a separate (atomistic) identity, with a separate set of beliefs and values. Consequently, the task of a community, from this abstractionist perspective, is to find or create some commonality of these unique and varied individual beliefs.

Consider the prominent communities of today. The task of many religious communities, at least as often understood, is to find or create a commonality of theological beliefs and values. The task of a political community is often viewed as finding or creating a commonality of political theory or principle. Even professional organizations are often seen as bound together through similar values and propositional understandings, such as an ethical code, worldview, or scientific principles. The phrases “understood as” and “viewed as” are important here because commonality of abstraction is not necessarily what *really* draws people together, especially in fundamental ways.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This issue is, at least in part, an ontological issue, because what *really* draws people together involves assumptions about what is *real*.

Rather, our typical understandings and views of community use the resources of this abstractionist ontology to *explain* what unifies its members.

*Relationist.* The relationist ontology, by contrast, provides a different framework for interpretation and explanation. Communities that attempt to effect fundamental unity cannot be communities of belief because belief is not the most fundamental level of being and existence. Communities of belief are more thin and fragile because the more fundamental and real is human relationality. A relational ontology assumes that we are always and already community; our very nature is shared through practices and our very constitution is mutual. Community members are, of course, separable, just as parts of a whole are separable from other parts. They have their unique contribution to the community. However, our qualities – just as the qualities of all parts, are mutually constituted and contextual. As Ken Gergen (1994) has long held and many others have argued (Gunton, 1993; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife, 2004), a careful study of the traits or roles of an individual – honesty, forbearance, mother, and husband – bears out their strongly relational character.

The main community task from this strong relational perspective is to recognize and live out this ontological relationality. People do not have to *build* community in this sense. They do not have to endorse a value system or conform to an ethical code because they are always and already intimately connected. This is not to say that values or ethical codes are unimportant; it is only to say that their commonality does not *constitute* a community. Indeed, as we will see, a strong relational perspective implies that community members retain their differences and *not* conform to some common

abstraction completely, because true community from this relational perspective *requires* difference.

Recall that relationship requires someone or something to be in relationship with – an irreducible or alien other (Gadamer, 1995; Levinas, 1987). If there is no other, if there is only a narcissistic reflection of ourselves, then there is no authentic relationship and no individual qualities that originate from that relationship. The same is true for the community. The community’s richest resources originate from its intra- and inter-community differences. Therefore, one of the most important tasks of a relational community is to protect difference and otherness, so as to form the complementary functions of a richly textured community. Again, this task does not mean that common beliefs are unimportant. It just means that these beliefs are secondary to and ultimately should be in the service of facilitating something more basic – complementary and intimate relationships.

### *The Primary Threat to Community*

*Abstractionist.* With agreement about beliefs and values as the main source of unification, the primary threat to an abstractionist community is disagreement, difference, and conflict about such beliefs and values. Several keen observers of community and relationship have noted how different people and their beliefs often are from one another, *even within the same community* (Bernstein, 1983; Levinas, 1987; Ricoeur, 1978).

Bernstein (1983), for instance, has used the term “incommensurable” to describe many of these intra-community differences (p. 3). Incommensurable differences are not only deep differences of incompatible beliefs and values but also fundamental differences among the standards by which we judge there to be differences.

Needless to say, such differences are perceived as a dire threat to abstractionist communities of depth because their very essence is thought to derive from some core agreement about standards and beliefs. For example, the noted philosopher of science, Karl Popper (1959), considered incommensurability to be a dire threat to the scientific community. If important ideas and paradigms are incommensurable, as Kuhn (1970) seemed to contend, Popper believed that no common standards would exist for evaluation, obviating even the possibility of a unified scientific community (cf. Slife, 2000).

Recent research on teenage relationships exemplifies this abstractionist threat for more conventional communities. For instance, Beyers' (2002) study shows how central agreement is perceived to be in friendship and disagreement is perceived to be in the enmity of many teenage communities. Beyers emphasizes that these are perceptions because these teens have apparently adopted an abstractionist framework in understanding their relationships in this manner. Agreement about abstractions (e.g., beliefs about dating) was considered to be the key to any kind of positive relationship. In fact, longstanding disagreement, however seemingly trivial, was associated in the study with the dehumanization and objectification of the other – both abstractions.

As a result, Beyers speculated about the ease with which a Columbine type tragedy could occur with such dehumanizing and thin perceptions. Shooting an objectified fellow student is dangerously close to shooting other objects. For these reasons, she found that close friends often took special pains to avoid discussing anything remotely conflictual. However, she also noted that avoiding meaningful conflict made the relationships superficial and fragile. In addition, continual conflict avoidance led to

stunted skills at conflict resolution and peace-making, further compounding fears and anxieties about community differences.

*Relationist.* Interestingly, the relationist need not fear most community differences and instead may very well welcome them. The richness of differences helps define the richness of the community, promoting fascinating and productive dialogue rather than anxious and destructive fragmentation. The main threat, from this relationist perspective, is the loss of meaningful dialogue, the fount of individual growth and community connectedness within diversity. Community differences, in this sense, are far from being a threat, as they are for the abstractionist, but rather are the engines of change and relationship itself.

Some may assume, along with the philosopher Karl Popper (1959), that fundamental differences of abstractions, such as incommensurable differences, would still prevent true relationships. However, this assumption stems from the notion that commonality of belief is necessary to true relationships. In fact, many prominent scholars contend that incommensurability does not prevent relationship (e.g., Bernstein, 1983; Feyerabend, 1975; Kuhn, 1970). As James Faulconer (2004) puts it,

“the encounter with the other person . . . is an encounter with that which is absolutely beyond one’s understanding and will remain beyond it, though one may not recognize that it does. But in being beyond one’s *comprehension*, the other person is *not* also beyond *relation*” (emphasis added, p. 286).

In this sense, people can deeply and incommensurably differ but still learn from one another, communicate, and perhaps even delight and love one another – across *almost any* abstractionist divide.

The qualifier “almost any” here indicates that *relativism* is another important threat to a relationist community – for at least three reasons. First, a relativist would advocate the tolerance of *all* differences within community, not “almost any.” In other words, the relationist would not affirm all differences because some differences would conflict with the moral implications of strong relationality. The relational valuing of dialogue, for example, would mean the valuing of certain conversational virtues, virtues that allow for and facilitate meaningful dialogue (Sugarman, 2004). Second, a relativist “tolerates” differences as if they are problematic. A relationist, by contrast, views community differences as a source of strength and connection that should be actively *engaged* rather than merely *tolerated*. Third, relativists provide no positive telos or overarching purpose for community, and thus bring an “anything goes” outlook that fosters little more than a negative connection – the connection we have when we want to protect our autonomy or lack of connection. The relationist, by contrast, asserts a positive connectedness, because we are not brought together merely out of our fear of losing autonomy; we are brought together by our natural and often unrealized shared being.

For this reason, the community’s telos or primary purpose is seen as living into the reality of our constitutive relatedness, with everything serving and facilitating this ontological reality. All belief structures and ethical values are evaluated in the light of whether they facilitate authentic relationships – love, intimacy, and closeness – even among people who are different. Instead of merely tolerating moral ideals, which may presuppose a lack of real unity or deep commonality, a relational approach can lead to very real and supportive moral beliefs. These beliefs are secondary to concrete

community relationships, to be sure, and their meaning and applicability, because they only existing in living relation to particular contexts, must regularly be reinterpreted anew. Yet, this contextuality is not the relativism of “anything goes” but the sensitivity of caring about the circumstances and cultural differences associated with loving anyone who is “other.”

### *The Main Protection Against Threat*

*Abstractionist.* The main protection against conflicts of beliefs and values in abstractionist communities is twofold: conflict avoidance and fervent persuasion. The first occurs when differences and disagreements are skimmed over or assumed to be tolerable or nonessential. Indeed, new and formative communities often focus entirely on points of agreement for fear that disagreement and otherness will disrupt their fledgling unity. Powerful and charismatic leaders are frequently designated to define the core beliefs of the community so that conflicting beliefs are more easily avoided. Even so, new community members have to be extremely cautious about expressing their beliefs for fear that they voice a belief that is considered in serious conflict with the community. As mentioned, this fear and stress is part of the reason that individualistic living arrangements, such as private dwellings, are so popular in modern society. They allow us sanctuary from the pressure of belief conformity and value monitoring.

The second way for the abstractionist to meet the threat of difference is persuasion. If disagreement with the other is a threat, one should remove the threat by persuading the other to agree. The problem is that this practice is sometimes perceived to violate the Western sense of autonomy because the other may be persuaded to sacrifice his or her authentic self to join the community. From this perspective, persuasion of the

other may seem more like reduction of the other. Indeed, if the philosopher Levinas (among others) is correct and the other cannot, in principle, be completely reduced, then persuasion can be the source of many social and even physical forms of violence – attempting to reduce the irreducible. And what if the other is not persuaded? Obviously, one likely consequence is exclusion or ostracism from the community. If the community holds the keys to desirable goods, then such exclusion could be deeply painful and injurious.

These problems of violence and power have prompted many to hope that community disagreements could be decided on neutral or objective grounds, such as the practices of modern science. The violence of conventional persuasion – persuading someone from one value-system or culture to adopt another – would be replaced with supposedly bias-free methods. Increasingly, however, it is clear that such neutrality is impossible (Slife & Williams, 1995). Recent scholars have exposed the value-ladenness of the methods and practices of science and even the methods and practices of psychotherapy. At one time, for instance, therapists believed they could strike a relatively neutral posture in their practice with clients – the blank screen of the psychoanalyst, the objective observer of the behaviorist, or the interpersonal mirror of the humanist. However, recent research on values in psychotherapy is unequivocal – not only do therapists hold important values in actual practice but they also inevitably seek to persuade their clients to hold them (Slife, Smith, & Burchfield, 2003).

Consideration of the practices of science has followed a similar course. Empirical evidence was first viewed as a neutral way to settle the disagreements of the scientific community. Increasingly, however, it is seen as a part of, rather than apart from, this

persuasion process (Schick, 2000). In other words, because all methods, including those of science, are value-laden, their use and the dissemination of their findings (scientific practices) amount to an endorsement of their values and an attempt to persuade others to those values. In this sense, the problems of violence that sometimes arise with persuasion are not mitigated by their disguised presence in our supposedly neutral methods. Indeed, such a disguise only serves to hide such problems, making them more difficult to identify and challenge. Barrett (1986), for example, discusses the imperialism of scientific methods when their hidden Western values are exported to other cultures.

*Relationist.* Unlike the abstractionist community, differences and disagreements about abstractions are rarely major problems for a relationist community, so conflict avoidance and persuasion are not needed. Indeed, a diversity of worldviews, even incommensurable ones, is viewed as the lifeblood of productive dialogue and enriching relationship. Conflicts, in this sense, are not only expected but sought. To actually seek conflict may seem far-fetched, but conflict from this relational perspective rarely means a breach in relationship and is thus inherently less threatening and less anxiety provoking. Further, the relationist knows that conflicts are a tremendous opportunity for learning, growth, and intimacy, so experience with conflicts is frequent and skills in handling them are honed.

For the same reasons, relationists feel considerably less pressure to persuade other members of their community. However, no community can or should do away with persuasion altogether. Some forms of persuasion are part of sharing and engaging others. This engagement is partly what distinguishes relational from relativist communities: relational community members do not merely tolerate one another's beliefs; they also

care about and thus wish to share and relate to the other's beliefs and values.

Nevertheless, the press for agreement is considerably less in a relationist community because the ground of relationship – shared being – is not jeopardized by disagreement. Indeed, difference and disagreement is expected and celebrated because any good community is recognized as having dissimilar and complementary components. This recognition also implies less fear of rejection and more relational safety because there is more chance of being valued for who you are, including your differences.

What, then, is the main protection against community threat for the relationist? The answer may seem appallingly trite, but it can be characterized as loving relations, or what Aristotle called friendship. Love and friendship here does not mean merely being nice or even necessarily acting warmly, because confrontation and conflict is viewed as pivotal to loving relationships in a relationist community. Love also does not mean making others into me, either by overlooking differences or attempting to persuade them to become me. From this perspective, loving others to the extent that they are like me – in beliefs, values, and principles – is not loving them at all. Love, from this relational standpoint, implies truly valuing others as they are, in all their potentially incommensurable differences. Without love of this kind, true dialogue and thus true relational growth are impossible. This type of love, then, is the main protection against the primary threat of relational communities – the lack of real dialogue and intimacy.

### *Conclusion*

At this juncture, our discussion of community tasks, threats, and protections may seem far afield from the potential “practice turn” of psychology. However, this discussion illustrates just one of the many fruitful avenues of exploration and implication

if practice is taken seriously. As long as practice is viewed from an abstractionist ontology, as an extension or application of psychological theory and technique, its unique and radically relational roots will remain unrecognized and unexplored. Psychology will remain mired in the legacy of Plato, where virtually everything was an extension of his subjectively contained and unchangeable Forms. With Plato, as in much of Western culture, all fundamental distinctions, such as individual and community identity, are made through differences in supposedly contextless beliefs and values.

Moving away from this abstractionist ontology and moving toward a serious understanding of concrete practice is to have this Platonic veil pulled away. Suddenly, the engaged and situated character of our lives becomes clear. We are no longer primarily rational beings, with our minds and ideas as our only or even our primary resources. We are contextual beings with inbuilt relational resources to other contextual beings. It is no coincidence that successful marriages and good support systems are as important as the medicine we are taking. A relational ontology would help psychologists understand the importance of these individual and community resources, where conflicts can be engaged rather than avoided, otherness can be valued rather than feared, and community can truly be a unity of diversity.

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