# Cutting Through False Dualisms: Transformative Social Change as a Transmodern Moral Framework for Critical Psychological Research

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## Abstract

In this article, I will use the two truths doctrine from Buddhism to explicate transformative social change as a transmodern moral framework for critical psychological research. The two truths doctrine, a teaching from the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, school of Mahāyāna Buddhism founded by Nāgārjuna, nondualistically collapses the ontology of transformation (absolute truth) and the epistemology of social change (relative truth) in the name of soteriology. At their core, dualistic problems and reductionist solutions are based upon the reification of concepts, which can result in devastating effects, such as the objectification (and oppression) of research participants—not mentioning moral relativism. This article attempts to offer a transmodern moral framework for qualitative and theoretical researchers in critical psychology outside the confines of the modern–postmodern debate.

## Keywords

critical psychological research, morality, transformative social change, transmodernity, engaged Buddhism

## What is already known?

Researchers in critical psychology today are very aware of the ethical guidelines – usually outlined by a university's Institutional Review Board at least in the USA – that they have to follow when they are conducting a research project with human subjects, such as not only doing no harm but also benefiting society. However, as Charles W. Tolman argues, "ethics" are prudential and legally binding, but vary from discipline to discipline; in other words, they are not as universal as "morals" (e.g., human rights).

## What does this paper add?

This paper addresses the question of morality in critical psychological research, which is inherently the problem of universals-particulars. Said differently, how can we employ universal moral principles in our research without moralizing (which according to Tolman's model would fall under "values")? Building on the work of Tolman then, the author proposes a translogical/transmodern moral framework for qualitative and/or theoretical research in critical psychology – a *bricolage*, which draws practical insights from engaged Buddhism, social constructionism, and existential phenomenology among other areas of knowledge.

## Preface

Preparing for this article was an incredible task, to say the least, because I found myself attempting to condense not only 3 years of doctoral coursework but also around 2,500 years worth of knowledge and wisdom, which we can think of as world history and philosophy. One of the main reasons for the enormous difficulty of this task of intellectual condensation has to do with the fact that many of the debates that trouble psychology today and that have been troubling psychology since its 'birth' as a scientific discipline are centuries-old debates that are rooted in philosophy and other disciplines—not only in the West but also in other parts of the world. Also, given the practical limitations of time and human fallibility, so much information will be left out of this presentation, which leaves a lot of room for your imagination.

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## Introduction

Whereas we judge theories as true or false, we judge practices as right or wrong. Psychologists engage in a number of social practices, such as research, teaching, and clinical work, which are inherently moral. Tolman (2003) argues, "The moral compulsion is a *logical* compulsion" (p. 45, emphasis in original) and I agree with him, but I would add that as critical psychological researchers not only do we need to cultivate knowledge through scientific methods and wisdom through philosophical processes but we also have to develop an *understanding*, which can then be embodied as compassion.

In this article, I will use the two truths doctrine from Buddhism to describe "transformative social change" (TSC; see Williams, 2010) as a transmodern moral framework for critical psychological research. The two truths doctrine, a teaching from the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, school of Mahāyāna Buddhism founded by Nāgārjuna, nondualistically collapses the ontology of transformation (*absolute truth*) and the epistemology of social change (*relative truth*) in the name of soteriology—after all, the aim of the Buddhist project, from the Mahāyāna perspective, is the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering. This leaves us with axiological questions such as what are the moral implications of critical psychological research? In other words, who are the beneficiaries of said research and how is it affecting the participants as well as the society at large?

### TSC

A TSC-informed critical psychological researcher is principally a social activist on a journey of personal transformation, which can manifest in a number of ways, but as a way of illustration, I will principally focus on what engaged Buddhism has to offer to critical psychology. Buddhism "is a practice to help us eliminate wrong views" (Hạnh, 1998, p. 56). In the context of Buddhist teachings, wrong views are views that are not in alignment with the fact that we *inter-are* or that everything is interdependent. Engaged Buddhism asks the question: How can *dharma* (Buddhist teachings) be applied to the world in terms of effecting social change and not just personal transformation? That question assumes that these two dimensions are separate in the first place; TSC rejects that assumption. TSC is about bridging the gap between the personal and the political by recognizing the interconnectedness or inseparability of these two realms as well as other ones, which are usually demarcated by artificial disciplinary boundaries rooted in conceptual obfuscations.

### False Dualisms

At their core, dualistic problems (e.g., mind–body and subject–object) and reductionist solutions are based upon the reification of concepts, which can result in devastating effects, such as the objectification (and oppression) of research participants—not mentioning moral relativism. The former problem (objectification) is a product of modernity, while the latter problem (moral relativism) is a product of postmodernity. This is why—drawing on insights from engaged Buddhism and social constructionism—I am attempting to conceive of a *transmodern* framework (see Dussel, 2002) of subjectivity for critical psychology, which includes (post)modernity's best ideals (e.g., rigor and reflexivity) and not their morally reprehensible practices.

Mainstream psychological research is quasi-scientific—or "preparadigmatic" as opposed to "normal scientific" (Kuhn, 1962/1996)—because it tries without success to simulate the scientific method of the so-called natural sciences. The 'hard' sciences are paradoxically easier than a 'soft' science like psychology, particularly when the object of study is inanimate matter. But we know from physics that we cannot even take inanimate matter for granted because, on the quantum level, it is in fact living. The double-slit experiment puzzled the world with the observer effect, or how the researcher's subjectivity affects his or her object of study, wherein photons, for example, can manifest as either waves or particles. Psychology as a discipline is considered a social science and not a 'natural' science perhaps because its subject matter (psyche) is 'unnatural'—so why then endlessly attempt to naturalize psyche via psychologization and quantification? Further, mainstream psychologists—be they biological reductionists or cognitive dualists—essentially study subjectivity via subjectivity in the name of objectivity. In other words, by bracketing their own subjectivities for the sake of neutrality, these researchers end up (un)wittingly psychologizing and quantifying (i.e., objectifying and dehumanizing) research participants. Different challenges exist in the world of critical psychological research; for instance, Parker (1997a) argues for the psychoanalytic notion of "complex subjectivity" and against the two most common trends in qualitative or theoretical research: the discursive notion of "blank subjectivity" and the humanist notion of "uncomplicated subjectivity" (p. 1).

Infamous examples from the history of mainstream psychology of unethical and immoral 'experiments' that are still being taught to this day to thousands of introduction to psychology students around the world as exemplary studies in the discipline include the Little Albert experiment, the Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures, and the Stanford prison experiment. Of course, these three morally abhorrent experiments were not legally challenged back then because they were conducted before the publication of the *Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research* (or the Belmont report) in 1979.

A moral approach to qualitative or theoretical research understands (critical) psychology—or the discourse of psyche—as a human or contemplative science if we heed the calls of phenomenology and Buddhism, respectively. According to such an approach, the subjectivities of both investigators and participants are critically and reflexively included as parts of the research process while the natural attitude—our presuppositions as opposed to subjectivity itself—is what ends up getting bracketed à la the *epoché* (the phenomenological

reduction). Parker (1997a) deconstructs the subject–object problem at the heart of mainstream psychological research in the interest of human scientific rigor as follows:

> Subjectivity is not treated, as it is conventionally in psychology, as the idiosyncratic perspective of an individual disconnected from the shared 'objective' reality of the scientific community. Rather, the 'objective' position is seen as thoroughly subjective itself, for it is an attempt to keep a distance from the topic. Subjectivity in research can then be employed as a resource for the reading, a resource which then drives us to as close as we could be to an 'objective' account. (p. 10)

If we take science to mean the systematic production of knowledge, then we ought to consider multiple visions of an alternative psychology that is transdisciplinary and which would encourage the borrowing of theories from philosophy, history, religion, anthropology, sociology, and so on. Of course, a transdisciplinary psychology would paradoxically lead to its own demise, when the artificial demarcations between all disciplines of knowledge production are no longer valid.

Alternative visions of psychology have been proposed throughout recent history, and for good reasons, these visions have valued the crucial philosophical dimensions (e.g., ethics, aesthetics, and politics) of psychological research that usually get left out in most mainstream psychological research. Here Parker (1999), for example, explains why critical psychology must be transdisciplinary:

> Critical psychology stretches across the boundary marking the inside and outside of the discipline. It is not only 'interdisciplinary', in the sense that it must draw upon arguments raging across the academic and professional landscape, but '*transdisciplinary*' in the sense that it both questions the ways in which the borders were set up and policed by the colleges and training institutes and it stretches from the furthermost edges of the psy-complex to the centres of psychology. (p. 10, emphasis added)

As two resources for a transdisciplinary psychology, the phenomenologists envision psychology as a human science[1] and the Buddhists envision it as a contemplative science. What is in common between these two distinctive reformulations of psychology is that subjectivity is understood on its own terms and through the use of qualitative means, since meditation is fundamentally a qualitative research method. In both traditions, there is an emphasis on direct experience, but differences do exist regarding the nature of and the proper method for investigating said experience, and that is to some extent due to cultural dissimilarity. For example, phenomenology is the product of Western intellectualism, while Buddhism is the product of Eastern emancipation (i.e., the Śrama□a movement). Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis psychology, but a critical synthesis of the two (i.e., a human/contemplative science) can bridge the theory–praxis gap and lead us toward both transdisciplinarity (beyond artificial disciplinary boundaries) and transmodernity (past the modern–postmodern false binary that plagues many debates) in the social sciences.

The scientific method, or any method inspired by it, cannot help us recode (or describe a denaturalized) psyche. Recoding psyche involves a critique of the psy-complex, which necessitates wisdom or "understanding" (Hạnh, 1988/2009). After all, let us not forget that philosophy literally means the love of wisdom. Wisdom is necessary for a "psychology without foundations" (Stanley, 2013), so we can (a) focus on process instead of content, (b) develop panoramic awareness or multiperspectivalism, (c) question and problematize ideology, (d) and become more critically reflexive in our research as well as in our daily lives.

Psychology literally means the discourse of psyche, but what is this 'psyche' that we, as psychologists, are supposedly interested in? The etymology of psyche gives us a hint of its genealogy as a signifier. Psyche has meant at one point in time any of the following concepts: "the soul, […] spirit; breath; life, […] the invisible animating principle or entity which occupies and directs the physical body; understanding" (Harper, 2015). These definitions reflect the premodern, essentialist understanding of psyche as an eternal substance before it was secularized as an empirical object of study in the late 19th century to be later on in the 20th century reduced to society/culture, behavior, cognition, or the brain depending on who you talk to.

Psychology as a scientific discipline tends to stick to a secular definition of psyche as mind or as self. I will stick to the following operational definition of psyche as "the whole range of conscious and unconscious [bodily and] mental phenomena studied by psychologists, including perceptions of all kinds, thoughts, emotions, memories, fantasies, dreams, mental imagery, and so on" (Wallace, 2007, p. 6). Generally speaking, what unites psychologists seems to be a concern with explaining or describing subjectivity. What separates psychologists, however, are their presuppositions about and definitions of subjectivity, which ultimately inform how they research and come to describe or 'explain' psyche. Buddhist psychology provides us with an empirical alternative to cognitivism when it comes to understanding psyche that is both nonreductionist and nondual. I have written elsewhere about the connections and tensions between psychoanalysis, Buddhist psychology, and mind–body medicine when it comes to arriving at nonreductionist and nondual accounts of subjectivity or selfhood (see Beshara, 2015).

Undergraduate students taking an introduction to mainstream (i.e., Western) psychology course are typically taught about the birth of 'experimental' psychology as a scientific discipline in 1879 with Wilhelm Wundt's establishment of the first research laboratory in Leipzig, Germany. Students are then briefly lectured on how unreliable and unscientific the method of introspectionism was, and the rest of the course is usually dedicated to discussing the major research perspectives in psychology today, such as behaviorism, cognitivism, neuroscience, and socioculturalism. However, Wallace (2007) makes the case for introspectionism in a *don't throw the baby out with the*

*bathwater* fashion by arguing that introspectionism is not the issue per se but the fact that "this mode of observation has yet to be developed into a rigorous means of scientific inquiry" (p. 39), at least in the West. Consequently, according to Buddhist psychology, introspection "is a type of metacognition that operates as the 'quality control' in the development of *śamatha*…[and can be] defined as the repeated examination of the state of one's body and mind" (Wallace, 2007, p. 138, emphasis in original). In other words, the two main types of meditation techniques in Buddhism (i.e., *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*) are strong examples of the "rigorous means of scientific inquiry" necessary for introspection to be considered a valid and reliable research method in critical psychology, which can reap empirical results about subjectivity. Champions of the human/contemplative science approach are not the only robust defenders of this line of argument; there is also support among critical psychologists (e.g., Stanley, 2013).

To go back to our unfinished conversation about science, let us take a quick look at two important displacements that occurred during the history of modernity: "just as Descartes's idol of the soul has been replaced by the idol of the brain, so has the idol of God been replaced by the idol of Nature" (Wallace, 2007, p. 156). The scientific revolution was a cultural shift from a religious, premodern society informed by 'Judeo-Christian' morality to a secular, modern society informed by mechanistic amorality. This paradigm shift was necessary, and to many degrees, it reaped many technological benefits, but the 'value-free' scientific enterprise that came to replace the Church and its authority was immediately co-opted by the capitalist State in the 18th century, so the marriage of Church and State became the marriage of Science and State.

Scientism is a descriptor for this idea of Science as dogma, and "methodolatry" (Liu, 2011, p. 217) means worshiping the scientific method, or any method, as the only path to Truth. These are relevant ideas to highlight because psychology is a young, confused, unnatural, and quasi-scientific discipline that struggles with 'identity crisis' and 'physics envy' among other complexes that render it impressionable when it comes to false dualisms and misguided reductionisms.

Although my critique of the scientific method is inspired by Paul Feyerabend's (1975) anarchistic theory of science, I do not believe in the postmodern ethos of "anything goes" because for me science is the systematic production knowledge, which includes both subjective/relative truths (e.g., conscious experiences) and objective/absolute truth (e.g., Ultimate Reality). The remedy then for these two extreme positions of scientism and relativism when it comes to designing a critical psychological study or asking qualitative/theoretical research questions is a critical reflexivity informed by philosophy, history, theory, and practice. In this article, I primarily use Buddhism and phenomenology as two exemplary frameworks for reinvigorating psychology toward such a critical reflexivity, but other equally reinvigorating frameworks from critical psychology include Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, poststructuralism, and postcolonial studies.

Therefore, mainstream psychology is not simply a scientific enterprise, whose aim is to generate value-free knowledge;

rather, it is a power/knowledge *dispositif* (psy-complex) embedded in a larger apparatus (global capitalism), which produces and reproduces the types of knowledge, or beliefs, that maintain the social order and that sustain asymmetric power relations via structural violence (e.g., poverty). For example, the American Psychological Association's collusion with the U.S. government to develop "enhanced interrogation techniques" or psychological torture (Hoffman, 2015) speaks to the politico-economic context that makes this kind of 'scientific' research possible—namely, a humanitarian imperialism spearheaded by neoliberalism/neoconservatism and enacted by the military–industrial complex. Clearly, critical psychological research only concerned with knowledge production for the sake of profit and not with wisdom maintenance, too, will result in nothing but moral (read: politico-economic and ecological) crises. Foucault (1988) with his research on madness and the antipsychiatry movement in general are good references to keep in mind here, particularly for methodological inspiration.

With that said, I invite you to go with me a journey, wherein I will attempt to cut through several false dualisms that are presupposed in mainstream psychological research and which are never questioned or problematized explicitly by most mainstream psychologists. My critique is comprised of three levels of analysis that deal with the ontology of transformation, the epistemology of social change, and the axiology of transformative social change as informed by theories from engaged Buddhism, social constructionism, existential phenomenology, and critical (discursive) psychology. My goal is to consider a nondual, nonreductionist, and transmodern moral framework for critical psychological research of a qualitative or theoretical nature.

## Morality

I will start by considering Tolman's (2003) moral philosophy as it relates to critical psychological practice, theory, and subject matter, and then I will build on his work using the moral law of karma from Buddhism because Tolman (2003) reduces moral action to logic without considering trans-logical factors.

Tolman's (2003) understanding of morality seems to be rooted both in pragmatism and in rationalism, as is clear from his emphasis on both practice and action: "we are essentially *moral* beings; intentional action is essentially *moral* action" (p. 53, emphasis in original), and his emphasis on logic: "actions are essentially characterized by choice, agency, teleology, and noncausality/logicality, and meaning" (p. 53). I know that the word 'morality' is charged, but I propose that we reconsider the way we shy away from it. Consequently, I find Tolman's (2003) distinction between values, ethics, and morality to be very helpful, particularly as I attempt to reclaim and recode this unpopular concept.

According to Tolman (2003, p. 38), "Values tend to be highly subjective, individualized, and particular," whereas:

> Ethics refers in the popular sense to standards of conduct, usually in restricted spheres such as medicine, banking, scientific research,

and psychological practice. These standards or rules make sense because they are based on a set of agreed-upon aims in the pertinent area of practice. […] And the grounds on which these codes regulate are most often prudential ones, such as the avoidance of being sued. (p. 39)

Morality for Tolman (2003), however, is a whole new ball game: "The good of morality must be objective, social, and universal" (pp. 38–39). He further argues, "the subject matter of psychology is characterized by its morality. Morality must then be *constitutive*. Ethical codes, on the other hand, tend not be *constitutive* of the actions they govern. They are *regulative* only" (p. 39, emphasis in original).

Therefore, Tolman (2003) differentiates between the common goods (e.g., culture and language) and distributed goods (e.g., bicycle paths). Distributed goods are decomposable because they are "individual goods shared by members of a group" (Tolman, 2003, p. 41). The ideal of the common good is having "communities of practice in which all members are engaged in a common effort directed at the maintenance and further development of their own humanity under mutually supportive relations" (Tolman, 2003, p. 44).

I find his emphasis on the moral nature of practice or action to be instructive: "Practice[2] is the most fundamental human characteristic; community is the most fundamental human problem" (Tolman, 2003, p. 44). Since critical psychological research is a practice, we must ask ourselves as qualitative/theoretical researchers the following moral questions again and again: How will our research affect others (research participants, other investigators, and the general public) and who will benefit from it?

"The moral compulsion is a *logical* compulsion" (p. 45, emphasis in original), Tolman (2003) reminds us, while adding:

Knowledge, like practice, does not belong to isolated individuals. It is always constituted collectively. […] The needs satisfied by knowledge are not just my needs but human needs. […] The key to the *imperative* character of theoretical knowledge lies in the priority of the practical (i.e., the moral) over the theoretical and the ultimate unity of the two. (p. 46, emphasis in original)

*Karma and pratītyasamutpāda (conditioned coproduction).* The moral law of karma unites theoretical knowledge with practical wisdom in a trans-logical fashion according to the principle of conditioned coproduction (or *pratītyasamutpāda*[3]). Here is a definition of karma from Rahula (1974):

The theory of karma is the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction; it is a natural law, which has nothing to do with the idea of justice or reward and punishment. Every volitional action produces its effects or results. (p. 32)

According to Reginald Ray (2000),

One of the most important groupings of dharmas[4] in the Abhidharma[5] is that of the twelve nidanas,[6] which illustrate the principle of conditioned coproduction in a particularly vivid way. The twelve nidanas are particularly helpful because they show in a clear and unmistakable manner how karma works, illustrating how our current situation is the result of past actions and how our present actions will determine our future circumstances. The stream of dharmas that makes up the experience of each individual is unique and reflects the particular karma of that person. (p. 376)

Now, you may have noticed that according to the moral law of karma, which explains how rebirth in the cycle of *Sa☐sāra* works, does not leave a lot of room for freedom of choice; however, Buddhism is not entirely endorsing a deterministic vision when it comes to the question of free will as Ray (2000) explicates:

Between nidanas seven and eight, there is a gap in the process of ego. Between feeling, the final karmic-result nidana, and thirst, the first karma-producing nidana, there is an open space. There is no inevitability here and no predetermination. Here is the point at which we have freedom. […] It is, then, possible for us to rest in the open space after feeling and before thirst. In other words, we can stay with our pleasure and pain without trying to do anything about it. However, the gap between feeling and thirst is a fleeting one and it is generally most difficult for us to see this place, much less to be able to rest in it. For this reason, we need a method to enable us to take advantage of this openness in our own state of mind, to find it and rest in it. This is the purpose of meditation. If we learn to be increasingly present to our own experience through mindfulness and through developing insight into the process of our own experience, our rampant discursiveness begins to slow down. (pp. 385–386)

## The Personal Is Political: Toward Critical Reflexivity

I borrow the expression 'the personal is political' from the second-wave feminism because it summarizes in a pithy way my philosophy as a scholar–practitioner–activist. In other words, I am personally implicated in my academic research, which is political in nature, and those two dimensions cannot be separated.

The phenomenologists' argument against Kantian idealism is that *phenomenal worlds* are knowable when the *epoché* is applied and describable in psychology via something like the descriptive phenomenological method. The Buddhists would go further and argue that the *noumenal world* is knowable through meditation because "consciousness is at least as fundamental to the universe as mass-energy and space-time" (Wallace, 2007, p. 93), but that it is indescribable because consciousness transcends concepts and language.

## The Two Truths Doctrine

*A soteriological framework for understanding psyche.* Buddhism is concerned with the elimination of suffering, and so the distinction between ontology and epistemology is considered irrelevant, but I am considering that distinction in my presentation for the sake of clarity. Buddhist theory offers us the pragmatism of *understanding*[7] as the Middle Way between the following extremes: the rationalism of philosophy (wisdom) and the

empiricism of science (knowledge). Buddhism as a contemplative science combines rationalism with empiricism in the three *prajñās*[8] but adds a powerful set of research tools that we refer to broadly as meditation.[9]

*Three kinds of suffering.* There are three kinds of suffering according to Buddhist psychology (Hạnh, 1998, p. 19): (1) The suffering of suffering (e.g., birth, old age, sickness, death, etc.), (2) the suffering associated with change (all conditioned phenomena are impermanent), and (3) the suffering of composite things. This is a helpful guide for critical psychological researchers interested in reducing suffering in the world.

To quote Rahula (1974), "What we call a 'being,' or an 'individual,' or 'I,' according to Buddhist philosophy, is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates" (p. 20).

## The Ontology of Transformation: The Deconstruction of Psyche

*Absolute truth.* What *is* psyche? Psyche is empty according to the principle of *shunyata*. What does it mean for psyche to be empty? Psyche "is empty of a separate, independent existence. […] It is empty of a separate self. But, empty of a separate self means full of everything" (Hạnh, 1988/2009, p. 7). This ancient yet radical understanding from Buddhism resonates perfectly with some recent trends in postmodern theory; however, I will try to show that emptiness does not mean the same thing as nothingness.

Trungpa (1973) speaks of emptiness as openness and as space. He adds, "Cutting through our conceptualized versions of the world with the sword of prajna, we discover shunyata— […] emptiness, voidness, the absence of duality and conceptualization" (p. 187).

Hạnh (1988/2009) calls emptiness, "the ground of everything" (p. 15), and Welwood (2000) adds that it is a "groundless ground" (p. 66). *Primordial awareness* is beyond concepts, but the closest image I can come up with is that of spacetime as the fabric of the cosmos. Similarly, primordial awareness can be thought of as the fabric of the *lifeworld*, which is not separate from nature—just a different description of the same reality.

*Emptiness   Nothingness.* According to the first law of thermodynamics, energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but it can change form. Similarly, in Buddhism, karma can be thought of as the law of conservation of consciousness, which explains how rebirth works. Many continental philosophers conflate emptiness with nothingness as if the two were indistinguishable—a misinterpretation that Timothy Morton (2007) traces back to Hegel—if we use nothingness, or nihilism, as a framework, how can we explain rebirth? If nothing is born and nothing dies, what is there? Some *Thing* (*das Ding*) has to be reborn. Buddhists believe our karmic seeds are what get reborn. How do we reconcile being (Eros) with nonbeing

(Thanatos) then? Hạnh's (1998) solution is interbeing *qua* absolute truth or Ultimate Reality (*Nirvā□a*).

At the heart of *shunyata* is the experience of nonduality, which Trungpa describes (1973) as:

> [N]ot merely awareness of what we are and how we are in relation to such and such an object, but rather it is clarity which transcends conceptual padding and unnecessary confusions. One is no longer fascinated by the object or involved as a subject. It is freedom from *this* and *that*. What remains is open space, the absence of this-and-that dichotomy. (p. 197, emphasis in original)

Another way of understanding emptiness is in terms of conditioned coproduction, impermanence, and nonself.

*Anattā.* The Buddhist position on nihilism and eternalism in relation to the principle of *anattā* (nonself) is presented here from the Theravāda perspective (via Rahula, 1974) and further clarifies the misunderstanding:

> According to the Buddha's teaching, it is as wrong to hold the opinion 'I have no self' (which is the annihilationist theory) as to hold the opinion 'I have self' (which is the eternalist theory), because both are fetters, both arising out of the false idea 'I AM'. The correct position with regard to the question of *Anatta* is not to take hold of any opinions or views, but to try to see things objectively as they are without mental projections, to see that what we call 'I,' or 'being,' is only a combination of physical and mental aggregates, which are working together interdependently in a flux of momentary change within the law of cause and effect. (p. 66, emphasis in original)

For a review of complex subjectivity from a Mahāyāna perspective, the reader is encouraged to learn about the five *skandhas*, the eight layers of consciousness, and primordial consciousness/awareness (Hạnh, 1998; Wallace, 2007).

*The embodiment of primordial awareness.* The embodiment of primordial awareness is called Buddhanature in the Vajrayāna tradition, but if you prefer a more secular version of the term, De Wit (2001) calls it our "fundamental humanity" or "humaneness" (p. 35). The idea is that we are already Buddhas, but layers of confusion cloud our vision as a result of our karma, which makes it difficult for us to see our true nature; in the end, our true nature is not separate from the nature of Ultimate Reality. This is a powerful insight to keep in mind as we deal with research participants, for instance.

## The Epistemology of Social Change: The Psychosocial Construction of Psyche

*Relative truth.* What *do* we know about psyche and what *can* we know about psyche? To answer these questions, I predominantly draw on the works of Kenneth J. Gergen, Ian Parker, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

*Social constructionism.* The postmodern project of social constructionism has a lot in common with Buddhism (cf. "relational Buddhism" in Kwee, Gergen, & Koshikawa, 2006; Kwee, Naylor, Tilakaratne, Gergen, 2010). I have already addressed some of the similarities and differences between social constructionism and Buddhism elsewhere in *The Psychological Construction of Reality: An Essay in the Buddhist Psychology of Knowledge* (Beshara, 2016). With the interpretive/linguistic turn, we saw a shift from rationalism and humanism to (post)structuralism and antihumanism. Buddhism and social constructionism share some common goals: the deconstruction of the self as a reified concept and the reduction of suffering in the world. But whereas Buddhism puts more emphasis on ontology and wisdom maintenance, social constructionism is an epistemological enterprise that seeks to problematize the very foundations of knowledge production that most of us take for granted.

Gergen (1999), for instance, highlights three conceptual problems at the heart of the presumption of individual minds: "the problem of two worlds, of individual knowledge of the world, and of self-knowledge" (p. 8). Since we have already addressed the first problem (i.e., subject–object), we shall address the second and third ones.

*The problem of individual knowledge of the world.* According to Gergen (1999),

> To think of knowledge which presents a 'problem,' and about which we ought to have a 'theory,' [Richard Rorty] writes, "is a product of viewing knowledge as an assemblage of representations." That is, we inherit the epistemological riddle because of the metaphor of mind as mirror. This "view of knowledge…is a product of the seventeenth century. The moral to be drawn is that if this way of thinking of knowledge is optional, then so is epistemology…." In effect, the insoluble problem of knowledge is only insoluble because of the dualist metaphor used to define the problem. We could abandon dualism and the problem would go away —or at least be revised in a more treatable form. (p. 11)

I would add that to posit an inside and an outside would suggest that a perfect vacuum exists, but according to physicists, there is no such a thing in reality as free space, which means that said separation between inside and outside is a discourse that has no basis in physical reality. More importantly, it is a discourse that creates a certain social reality, which is dualistic.

*The problem of self-knowledge.* Gergen (1999) considers what he labels "the problem of the inner eye" (p. 11) to be a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, which is a nominalist position. In other words, he is pointing to the problem of reification, or as he writes, "We have words such as 'thinking,' 'feeling,' 'wanting,' 'intending,' and so on; these seem concrete enough. But we mistakenly attribute the concreteness to an imaginary object" (p. 13).

At the end of the day, objective knowledge is "knowledge based on *experience* of the world as opposed to subjective imagination" (Gergen, 1999, p. 13, emphasis in original).

Therefore, we can conclude that both the Buddhists and the phenomenologists, in their nondual and nonreductionist approaches, are correct in recognizing and not conflating the imaginary, symbolic, and real—to use Lacanese—differences between subjective/relative/conscious truth (Saṃsāra) and objective/absolute/unconscious truth (Nirvāṇa).

This next passage from Gergen (1999) resonates with Feyerabend's anarchistic theory of science (as cited in Chalmers, 1999, p. 150), wherein "anything goes" is the single, unchanging principle of the scientific method:

> [S]cientific truths might be viewed as outgrowths of communities and not observing minds. […] objectivity and truth would not be byproducts of individual minds but of community traditions. And too, science could not make claims to universal truth, as all truth claims would be specific to particular traditions—lodged in culture and history. (Gergen, 1999, p. 14)

*Deconstruction.* Gergen (1999) in many ways starts where Jacques Derrida ends because deconstruction opens up a lot of space for interpretation; however, there is also a real danger in the deconstructive process becoming a form of cynical nihilism. In Derrida's words (as cited in Gergen, 1999),

> [A]ll our attempts to make sense […] first depend on a massive suppression of meaning. In an important sense, all rationality is myopic. […] Rationality, then, is not a foundation for anything. […] our 'good reasons' are in the end both suppressive and empty. (p. 30)

The question for us as scholar–practitioner–activists becomes: What are the effects of our writing styles on our readers? Because whether we realize it or not, conventions like writing style and intersubjective validation establish the truth-value of our research findings.

*Critical discursive psychology (CDP).* As already established, psychology literally means the discourse of psyche. As part of the psy-complex, mainstream (i.e., Western) psychology is a modern *dispositif*, which (re)produces its main object of study (psyche) among many other artifacts (e.g., quantitative and experimental research methods). This (re)production takes place in different settings (e.g., the University) to justify psychology's existence as a discipline of Science worthy of funding from the capitalist State. Additionally, psychology as a knowledge-producing discourse sustains asymmetrical power relations between researchers (subjects) and participants (objects). Because these power relations are embedded within a larger context (i.e., world history and the political economy), the discourse of psyche (or psychology) is reflective of (post) modernity's contradictions, which manifest as class/racial/sexual struggles.

What is discourse? The short answer: discourse is doing. But here is a longer answer from Parker (1997b):

> The term 'discourse' comprises the many ways that meaning is conveyed through culture, and so it includes speech and writing,

nonverbal and pictorial communication, and artistic and poetic imagery. People develop and 'express' their identity through the use of verbal, nonverbal, and other symbolic means of communication, such as art. Then, when they feel as if they are genuinely 'expressing' something inside themselves, they pick up and reproduce certain discourses about the nature of the self, and they find it difficult to step back and question where these ways of describing the world may have come from, and what interests they serve. (pp. 285–286)

Since ontological statements are speculative, I am drawn to CDP for personal/political reasons; also, pragmatically speaking, the objects of study in CDP (i.e., discourses) are accessible because they are socially shared, but discourses do not cover everything in the world.

*Embodiment and affect.* In acknowledging the extra-discursive dimensions of psyche, such as embodiment and affect, I find the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty to be particularly relevant since for him experience is immanently embodied and so is not some transcendent ideal.
For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2014):

> [T]he relation between the expression and that which is expressed, or between the sign and the signification, is not a one-way relation, such as the relation that exists between the original text and its translation. Neither the body *nor existence* could pass for the original model of the human being, since each one presupposes the other and since the body is existence as congealed or generalized, and since existence is a perpetual embodiment. (p. 169, emphasis in original)

In this perplexing passage, Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2014) definition of sensation/perception at the end seems to be in line with the Buddhist notion of *interbeing*:

> Reflection must clarify the unreflected view that it replaces, and it must show the possibility of this succession in order to be able to understand itself as a beginning. To say that it is still me who conceives of myself as situated in a body and as furnished with five senses is clearly only a verbal solution; since I am reflecting, I cannot recognize myself in this embodied I, since embodiment then remains in principle an illusion and the possibility of this illusion remains incomprehensible. We must again question the alternative between the for-itself and the in-itself that threw the 'senses' back into the world of objects and disengaged subjectivity, understood as an absolute no-being, from all bodily inherence. This is what we are doing by defining sensation as coexistence or as communion. (p. 221)

And finally, here is a succinct description of embodiment from the philosopher of ambiguity, "There is an autochthonous sense of the world that is constituted in the exchange between the world and our embodied existence and that forms the ground of every deliberate *Sinngebung* [sense-giving act]" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 466, emphasis in original).

The existential phenomenological understanding of psychology as a human science, as exemplified by the work of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2014) in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, complements Gergen's (1999) postmodern vision of psychology, but a tension arises between humanist and antihumanist approaches when discursive psychologists 'bracket' the ontology or the real of the subject—i.e., "the singularity of being" (Ruti, 2010)—in favor of epistemology (i.e., subject positioning). A pragmatic remedy for this tension between the two extreme positions of essentialism ('uncomplicated subjectivity') and constructionism ('blank subjectivity') is what Parker (1997a) labels 'complex subjectivity'—that is, a political subjectivity as read *qua* engaged Buddhism, social constructionism, and critical humanism.

## The Axiology of Transformative Social Change

*TSC as a transmodern moral framework for critical psychological research.* Now, what do we do? I propose that we draw philosophical, historical, theoretical, and practical insights regarding complex subjectivity from various resources in order to apply a transmodern moral framework to critical psychological research. In this article, I have chiefly relied on the following resources: engaged Buddhism, social constructionism, existential phenomenology, and critical (discursive) psychology by way of an illustration.

*CDP.* I feel empowered by Foucauldian approaches to discourse because according to Parker (1997b), "there is always room for resistance. Our study of the ways in which certain discourses reproduce power relations can also promote 'counter-discourses' or alternative arguments for what is usually taken for granted" (p. 287). In his critique of discourse analysis, Hook (2001), like Merleau-Ponty, stresses the importance of the "extra-discursive" (i.e., knowledge, materiality, and history), particularly when conducting archeological or genealogical analyses inspired by Foucault. Evidently, theoretical blind spots in one approach when it comes to explicating discourse and subjectivity can be compensated for by a bricolage of different critical approaches (e.g., Lacanian, Marxist, feminist, and/or postcolonial).

This critical eclecticism is clear in Parker's (1997b) vision of the transdisciplinary nature of critical psychological research—for example, "critical transformative psycho-analytic discourse analytic research" (Parker, 1997a, p. 14). At the end of his chapter, he writes, "A critical psychology has to be constructed from theoretical resources, life experiences and political identities *outside* the discipline. Only then does it make sense to deconstruct what the discipline does to us and to its other subjects" (Parker, 1997b, p. 298, emphasis in original).

*From deconstruction to reconstruction.* Gergen (1999) gives us some hope, particularly after psyche has been deconstructed:

> It is in this soil of critique and dead-end despair that social constructionism takes root. For many constructionists the hope has been

to build from the existing rubble in new and more promising directions. The postmodern arguments are indeed significant, but serve not as an end but a beginning. Further, if we are careful and caring the elaborating of the constructionist alternative, we shall also find ways of reconstituting the modernist tradition so as to retain some of its virtues while removing its threatening potentials. (p. 30)

My interpretation of Gergen's (1999) invitation is embodied in my application of the two truths doctrine as a soteriological framework, which dialectically combines the modern with the postmodern in the forms of relative and absolute truths. The resulting synthesis is transmodern because Buddhism lives outside the modern–postmodern framework; the dialogue between engaged Buddhism and critical psychology, therefore, necessarily had to go through that framework in order to reach the space outside of it (i.e., transmodernity).

*The bodhisattva ideal: The researcher as a scholar–practitioner–activist.* In the Theravāda tradition, the ideal is to achieve personal enlightenment (or become an *Arhat*) and escape the cycle of rebirth, but in the Mahāyāna tradition, the bodhisattva ideal has to do with aspiring to become enlightened and choosing to be reborn endless times to help liberate all sentient beings. The most important qualities of a bodhisattva are deep listening, understanding, and compassion—not ghastly qualities to have as a researcher!

In the contexts of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam/American war protests, here is what Thích Nhất Hạnh had to say about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.:

The moment I met Martin Luther King, Jr., I knew I was in the presence of a holy person. Not just his good work, but his very being was a source of great inspiration for me…. On the altar in my hermitage in France are images of Buddha and Jesus, and every time I light incense, I touch both of them as my spiritual ancestors…. In Vietnam, we refer to Dr. King as a 'Bodhisattva', an enlightened being devoted to serving humanity…. (Plum Village, 2013, emphasis in original)

## Conclusion

### Transdisciplinary Research

*The teleology of critical psychological research.* My goal as a scholar–practitioner–activist is to resist oppressive "grand narratives" (Lyotard, 1984) and recode them into counter-discourses and liberation practices— à la liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1996) and postcolonial studies (Said, 1978/2003). In other words, critical psychological researchers work through the problematic of suffering at two different but interconnected levels in order to reflexively theorize/enact: (1) their own personal transformation (cf. Romanyshyn, 2007) through (2) changing the social conditions, which position research participants in disadvantaged ways.

I end with the following quote from Hạnh (1998), a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher whom I find very inspiring:

For forty-five years, the Buddha said, over and over again, 'I teach only suffering and the transformation of suffering.' When we recognize and acknowledge our own suffering, the Buddha—which means the Buddha in us—will look at it, discover what has brought it about, and prescribe a course of action that can transform it into peace, joy, and liberation. Suffering is the means the Buddha used to liberate himself, and it is also the means by which we can become free. (p. 3)

"No mud, no lotus" (Hạnh., 2014).

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1. Wilhelm Dilthey got inspired by David Hume's conception of psychology as a 'moral science' and came up with the notion of 'human science.'. Then later on, Franz Brentano's student, Edmund Husserl, took that notion and applied it to the field and method of phenomenology.
2. Practice is defined as "the cooperative provision for basic needs through production of collectively agreed-upon outcomes by the social use of mediating tools" (Tolman, 2003, p. 43, emphasis in original).
3. Karmic seeds, "The collection of impressions that we have received since beginningless time. The sum total of these impressions exists at the most subtle level of our consciousness" (Ray, 2000, p. 375). Karmic seeds or mental formations are related to volition or mental action.
4. A *dharma* or "element reality" is "the smallest unit of experience that human beings can have. Dharmas are momentary appearances in our experience and follow one another in rapid succession" (Ray, 2000, p. 369).
5. "Higher dharma" or teachings—also known as Buddhist psychology.
6. Links in the chain of conditioned coproduction.
7. "Understanding, like water, can flow, can penetrate. Views, knowledge, and even wisdom are solid, and can block the way of understanding" (Hạnh, 1988/2009, p. 6).
8. Listening, contemplation, and meditation. "Almost all religions are built on faith—rather 'blind' faith it would seem. But in Buddhism emphasis is laid on 'seeing,' knowing, understanding, and not on faith, or belief" (Rahula, 1974, p. 8).
9. Meditation is a transformative process, but it can also be thought of as a research method. The two most prominent forms of meditation are shamatha (calm abiding) and vipashyana (insight). Shamatha involves concentrative focus on and mindfulness of an object (e.g., breathing), and vipashyana involves introspection into the mind's nature (i.e., primordial awareness), which is not separate from the nature of ultimate reality.

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