Subjectivity and the Critical Imagination in Neoliberal Capitalism: A Conversation with Thomas Teo

(Interviewed by Dennis Wendt, McGill University)

Introduction

Introduction by Dennis Wendt: Much in the world has changed between the day I was invited to interview Thomas Teo for this volume (Jan. 24, 2020) and the day the interview took place (May 30, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted our original plan to meet in Toronto during the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association conference I was planning to attend. Instead, we "met" using Zoom video-conferencing in our homes (he in Toronto and I in Montreal) on a Saturday afternoon while my wife and children played in the park. In addition to the pandemic, our interview, which occurred five days after the murder of George Floyd, was in the context of protests against anti-Black systemic racism and police brutality across the globe.

I have been acquainted with Dr. Teo and his scholarship for the past 15 years, primarily through our involvement in the Society for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology (Division 24 of the American Psychological Association). We share many concerns about the discipline of psychology and its applications, including the many ways that psychology reflects and perpetuates societal inequity and a neoliberal capitalist order. As a leading critical psychologist with a global mindset, Teo challenges many of the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical assumptions and practices within mainstream psychology in North America. Our

interview covers many aspects of this work. It begins by contextualizing Teo's scholarship in light of his early entanglement with an "Americanized" psychology during his training in Germany. We then discuss at length his scholarship concerning an "ontology of subhumanism" (Teo, 2020), including its intersections with social Darwinism, racism, and neoliberal conceptions of "dieability." Next, we discuss Teo's ideas for revealing hidden assumptions in psychology that reflect and perpetuate a neoliberal political order, as well as the importance for critical interrogation about and democratic community engagement in psychology research. We discuss how the discipline has responded to Teo's scholarship, and several ways that Teo has attempted to influence the discipline through developing accessible concepts for a general audience and interrogating hermeneutic deficits within psychology. This task is a difficult one, in light of psychology's neoliberal penchant for rewarding "epistemological grandiosity" (Teo, 2019a). We discuss how we see in psychology reasons to hope for change, along with reasons to be pessimistic. Finally, we discuss anticipated future directions for Teo's scholarship, in terms of developing a critical theory of subjectivity and providing a space for the psychological humanities.

In reviewing the transcript from our interview now, I am struck by the sheer importance of Teo's voice in the current moment. Given the myriad ways that the pandemic has illuminated societal inequities and the many vulnerabilities of a neoliberal capitalist order, especially in light of a swelling chorus calling for widespread reforms within psychology to address systemic racism, more and more psychology educators and students will inevitably need to turn to Teo's work. What remains to be seen is the extent to which this moment of reckoning will lead to recognition of psychology as a "problematic science," as well as open new directions for a more inclusive, global, critical, and socially just psychology.

Biographical Background and Knowledge Contexts

Dennis Wendt (DW): Thank you so much for meeting with me, Thomas. I am excited to talk about your work and how it applies in particular to an ethics of psychology in the context of a neoliberal political order. I thought we could begin by your briefly summarizing your body of work and what you feel holds it all together.

Thomas Teo (TT): For understanding academic subjectivity, perhaps the best way to begin is to consider some biographical information. When I began studying psychology at the University of Vienna in Austria, it was very apparent to us, as students, that a lot of what was proposed as psychological knowledge and practice was actually not what we expected, was not really relevant, was not really practical, was not really *emancipatory*, if you want to use this terminology. Very quickly, we realized that there was a problem with psychology at the university and in society, specifically in the 1980s.

In hindsight, we dealt with a psychology, its research and applications, based on what has been called the consequences of the Americanization of German-speaking psychology after the Second World War, particularly in West Germany and in Austria. This applied to content, and it also meant that students and scholars from, for instance, West Germany went to the United States to study, received their education there, came back, and imported Americanized psychology into a German-speaking context. You could make the historical argument that this Americanization was successfully completed in the 1960s. Due to this sociopolitical import of American psychology, the fact that German-speaking psychology had its own strong traditions, and the cultural changes in many Western countries at the same time, alternative approaches developed that sought to challenge Americanized

psychology based on what I have called indigenous intellectual German sources (Teo, 2013). This effort was combined with political ideas for a better organization of society.

The University of Vienna was even further behind other German-speaking universities. In the psychology department, we encountered, for instance, a social psychology that was already outdated in an international context. The behaviorist social psychology we were expected to learn was not what we students believed psychology could be. Controlling behavior and adapting people to the status quo, the emphasis on quantification, neglecting the subject matter of psychology—this was not our vision for psychology. Students founded the Society for Critical Psychology, which still exists today in Austria. I participated on the editorial board of the Society's journal, and this is where we studied alternative psychologies and articulated a critique of Americanized mainstream psychology. I was working early on, during my student days, with the intuition, to use this simplified explanation, that the way psychology was being taught and researched didn't really make sense and that it only promoted a science of control in a capitalist economy.

Looking for forms of explanation to make sense of why this was the case and for alternatives, I was influenced by German critical psychology (Holzkamp, 1983). I started at the University of Vienna, got my master of science there, doing quantitative empirical work, and then moved to the Free University in Berlin during my doctoral studies. In fact, for my dissertation, I was enrolled at the two universities at the same time, which was possible in the German-speaking system because you don't pay tuition—neither the University of Vienna nor the Free University of Berlin charged tuition. I got exposed to German critical psychology in West Berlin as well as to Western and Eastern Marxism in a city still divided when I moved there in 1988. I wrote my dissertation on German critical

psychology, studying in Berlin, but finished my program at the University of Vienna. Similar to many who are interested in an alternative academic psychological career, my first job was in a traditional psychology department because for many psychologists that is the only way to get an academic position. I worked at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin as a postdoc and as a research scientist before moving to Canada. Traditional research experience at the so-called highest level provided me with concrete knowledge about the varieties, possibilities, and limitations of psychological research.

I applied for and accepted a tenure-track position at York University in Toronto, where I have worked since 1996. Geographical and cultural changes have opened up new horizons to me. Indeed, I developed new perspectives in the North American context, sublating German-speaking experiences. For example, although I had worked on racism in Germany (Mecheril & Teo, 1997), the topic was treated very differently in the North American context as it drew on different sources and lived experiences by racialized groups. The intellectual task for me was, and it still is, to integrate those various intellectual and cultural experiences into a meaningful whole. What guided my critical work was an understanding and realization that psychology was and is a *problematic scienc*e, as some historians in the English-speaking world have called it (Woodward & Ash, 1982). In addition, I considered it necessary to develop the possibilities of an alter-psychology that is doing justice, global, and inclusive, and that addresses socially relevant issues that impact mental life.

We know historically that psychology has always tried to emulate the natural sciences. This has been the case because it's "better" to align yourself with something that is successful and brings money and is associated with power. Something that was already

perceived in the second half of the 19th century by many as being subordinate—meaning the humanities and social sciences, historiography for instance—were no models for psychology. Psychology has become what I now call a *hyperscience*, a discipline that uses strategies to hide the fact that it is not a natural science (Teo, in press). In order to do that, you inflate and complicate your methodological activities that conceal the temporality and contextuality of psychological phenomena, and you incessantly refer to your discipline as a science. In the end, you have a *hallucinatory resemblance* (Baudrillard, 1988) to a natural science in order to make up for substance and content. Certainly, psychology can produce scientific studies, but psychology is clearly not a science in a traditional sense. In constructive hindsight, one could call psychology a unique science that should actually have its own epistemology, based on its particular ontology, and its own ethical-political necessities.

I still think that there is something deeply problematic with the discipline and profession of psychology, and in my work I have analyzed critiques of psychology (Teo, 2005) as well as the ontological, epistemological, and ethical-political assumptions that guide the discipline in order to make sense of what is happening and in order to imagine alternatives (Teo, 2018b). I have used historical, theoretical, and critical work to make the case for a different psychology. From a critical perspective, one cannot detach psychology from the study of society, culture, and history. I understand that it is hard for people invested in the project of psychology to recognize or acknowledge substantive flaws in the existing project and to envision a theory of subjectivity that could bring sciences and humanities together and make sense of existing knowledge.

Ontology, Subhumanism, and *Dieability*

DW: I wonder if you might talk about some of your recent work as well and how it has developed. In particular, I'm thinking about your work on subhumanism.

TT: In my latest monograph (Teo, 2018b), I divided philosophical, or critical-theoretical investigations in psychology, into ontological, epistemological, ethical-political, and aesthetic studies. When it comes to ontology, we can identify psychology's implicit machine model in which humans are conceived as things that react towards stimuli. There is no conceptualization of the possibility that human beings can actually change the stimuli themselves. This means that psychology captures how the subject could adjust and operate within an existing environment, controlled by someone else, but not how the subject could actually change presented conditions. In an experiment, the subject is asked to do certain things, but in reality, they can walk out of the experiment. That is within one's capability as a human being, part of our human nature, if you like, part of our ontology. A subject can challenge the experiment during an experiment, can have a conversation about the experiment and argue that it doesn't make sense, and can ask, Why have you given me only five options in this condition? The experimenter cannot cope with these questions or actions—the subject would be considered atypical or an outlier whose responses need to be deleted from the data set. Our human nature also allows us to challenge and change the societal conditions of life, a possibility which needs to be part of a scientific study. This would be one stream of reflection when it comes to ontology.

In theoretical psychology, scholars have developed relational ontologies, which are clearly doing more intellectual justice than individualistic ontologies. But, as is often the case with my interests, I ask, What is missing in relational ontologies? In a negative

dialectical move that I picked up from German critical theory (Adorno, 1990), I ask, for instance, What is missing when we talk about empathy? What happens with empathy when it is applied selectively towards people that "I" perceive as similar to me but not towards human beings that are very different from "me" or that have been Othered? What happens with empathy when it comes to people that are radically different from "myself"? What is missing, indeed, is an ontology about people that are not conceived as humans.

Thus, when it comes to migration, I have tried to understand how it is possible that we treat people in the way we have treated them. I think about the European but also about the North American context. In the European context, in reality, people have been left dying in the Mediterranean Sea or have been refused entry at the harbor, and activists who have come to their rescue have been put on trial for helping humans in desperate need. Boat captains have been put on trial for helping migrants. At the American-Mexican border, you also have people aiding migrants by putting out water then ending up in courts for what we can call humanitarian behavior. I have asked myself: How can we explain that? There is a history of human rights and of liberal democracy in the European context, in the United States, and in Canada. In contrast, we have the reality that thousands of people have died in the process of migration, have been mistreated, and have been excluded from international law while children have been separated from their parents. How can we explain that from a psychological point of view?

I suggest that we need to go beyond a relational ontology in the sense that it seems that we continue to divide humanity into humans and subhumans. My thesis is that we operate with an ontology of subhumanism when it comes to migrants. This ontology connects with fascist thinking, with precursors of American eugenic thought, and with precursors of Nazi

ideology where subhumanism has played an important role to justify actions against groups of people who have been Othered. What is important in this ontology—it was also an insight for me—is that subhumanism is not primarily a rational, intellectual, or cognitive process. It is very much an affective and symbolic process. I gained this insight to a certain degree from Nazi German material on subhumans, which does not use scientific tables, graphs, and discourses. Rather, the material operates with emotional images and imaginations. For example, such material contrasts photos of orderly, nice-looking Germans with disorderly-looking beings.

What is fascinating about the idea of subhumanism is its malleability and flexibility. Accordingly, anyone can be made into a subhuman if they do not act in an orderly fashion. If you are outside of the constructed norm, if you are associated with affects and imaginations outside of the normal, and if someone has the power to make this ontology a reality, with circumstances and conditions supporting that idea, then anyone can become a subhuman. Thus, the concept of the subhuman is broader than the concept of 'race' and the concept of racism. My work on subhumanism is an example of the study of ontology, not only to develop a critique of psychology about implicit models in experimental or empirical research but also to develop concepts that can help us to understand current developments in a constructive way. The ontology of subhumanism allows us—while the critique is still there—to theorize contemporary problems such as migration or the COVID-19 crisis.

I have attempted to analyze the COVID-19 crisis with the concept of subhumanism, but I have realized that, although subhumanism plays a role in public and private discourses, its voice is less important than political-economic calculations. In what

Mbembe (2003) has called necropolitics, meaning people in power decide who can live and who can die, or who is *dieable*, as I call it in the COVID-19 crisis, subhuman emotionality takes a backstage to economic-instrumental rationality. In the fascist being, the question of *dieability*, or affective subhumanism, is combined with social Darwinist rationalizations. Capitalism works well with fascism, authoritarian governments, and neoliberal ideologies when it concerns *dieability*.

DW: That is interesting. I was wondering about the application to the COVID-19 pandemic as I was reviewing your writing on subhumanism recently. You focus on "migrants"—a term you put in quotation marks (Teo, 2020) —to refer to those who are in the process of migration. But you also talk about how subhumanism is not necessarily unique to migrants but extends to other populations as well. I was wondering about how that might apply to the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps you could say a bit more about this distinction you just mentioned between subhumanism and social Darwinism.

TT: Let me clarify. I make a distinction between fascist politics and fascist mentality or subjectivity. I believe that fascist mentality draws on (a) racism, sometimes scientific racism, a pseudoscientific intellectual stream of thought; (b) subhumanism, which allows for affective and symbolic expressions and is more malleable than racism; and (c) a pragmatic, economic Darwinism in order to justify political-economic decisions. There are other elements such as authoritarianism or nationalism, but these three elements are interesting for me because they have moved to the surface again. I have analyzed subhumanism in the context of migration and I also believe that the COVID-19 crisis shows the power of economic Darwinism. We increasingly find discourses and material practices for this fascist subjectivity.

There is a connection between social Darwinism and subhumanism, but it is not required. Social Darwinism—I like to call it, for current purposes, economic Darwinism—relies on ideology and common sense, whereas subhumanism reflects an affective-symbolic ontology. Economic Darwinism has never disappeared as an ideology in capitalist Western countries, whereas subhumanism was confined to the underground and only recently has re-emerged as a guiding ontology in politics but also in individual mental life. Neoliberal capitalism produces but does not necessarily need a subhuman ontology when Darwinist ideas are available. If you say that there are different races of people, and the White race won the historical struggle and therefore the White race can claim anything they want from colonies and subjugated other peoples, you can use a subhuman ontology, but you do not require it.

However, German fascism combined racism, subhumanism, and social Darwinism. In order to justify the extermination of people, one could use a social Darwinist, a subhuman, or a racist argument or appeal. In order to kill people with physical and mental disabilities, in the so-called T4 euthanasia program, Nazis used all of those appeals, including economic ones. They showed scientific tables and affective photos and appealed to the burden of financial costs and the impact on the German economy which would result from supporting people with disabilities. I suggest, from a psychological perspective, that many Germans were convinced by those economic, scientific, and biomedical discourses and practices in concert with the affective images and imaginations. One could turn this productively, I mean the stream of fascist appeals, depending on the circumstance and audience, when deciding which type of idea should be invoked. In scientific contexts, fascists would use pseudoscientific justifications, whereas in propaganda they could use

affective images. Similarly, for educational purposes one might need to use visualizations of ragged subhumans in concert with the scientific mantle of economic Darwinism and the instrumental logic of cost-benefit analyses. Fascism provides a whole ideological, practical-political, and subjective apparatus. Subhumanism is one element in that; economic Darwinism is another.

In the context of migration, I find it fascinating that an element of fascism, the ontology of subhumanism, has re-emerged in liberal democracies. In my article (Teo, 2020) I mention not only implicit but also explicit discourses where the terms are used against migrants in Austria, Canada, Germany, and the United States. Former President Obama needed to distance himself from the ontology when suggesting that we should not invoke the idea that certain people are subhuman. Why would he need to appeal to that? Well, there seems to be already a broad discourse in which this idea is taking hold. Yet, it is not just a matter of language but also a matter of ontology that divides humanity.

DW: Another thing I wondered about as I was reviewing your work on subhumanism is how it might pertain to the events of last week of May 2020 in the United States in terms of the acts of violence from police towards African Americans and the killing of George Floyd. I wonder how you would think about these events and these problems in terms of the interplay of subhumanism and racism.

TT: Racism can invoke subhumanism and vice versa, but subhumanism is broader than racism. In the migration debate, people who appear to be White cannot be racialized, but they can be subhumanized. Syrian refugees, who may look like Steve Jobs (who had a Syrian father), can be subhumanized even when racialization does not work. To explain the treatment of White refugees, the contempt for them, their differential treatment, we can

provide an analysis based on processes of subhumanization instead of a process of racialization, which does not seem to work there. You could use religion, and suggest, from a supremacist point of view, that Islam is an inferior religion, as has been done against Muslim migrants. Again, this would not work for refugees that do not follow Islam. What is left is the subhumanization of migrants.

When it comes to the treatment of African Americans by police in the United States, you clearly find systemic racism, personal racism, combined with elements of dehumanization. The killing and mistreatment of Black citizens by police thrives primarily on racism. The mistreatment of White demonstrators, journalists, and activists cannot be explained by racism but by the *temporary subhumanization* of perceived opponents who do not need to be treated as human beings. This takes place against the background of systemic and institutional realities of police departments, their culture, and individuals with violent affordances. “Jogging while being Black” or “driving while Black” or “shopping while Black” or “birdwatching while Black” or “sleeping while Black,” and their sometimes fatal consequence, are nourished by the history and actuality of racism in the United States connected with dehumanizing and subhumanizing practices. The call for Black Lives Matter, difficult for some Americans to understand, is of course perfectly reasonable because processes of racism and subhumanization have made Blackness into a category where empirically Black lives have mattered less than White lives.

Racism does not need the ontology of subhumanism, although often enough it is included, when race theories work with rankings that consider certain races below the human standard. The actual effects of racism, based on the history of racism in the United States—racism as an ideology, racism as a systemic reality, racism as an embedded

practice in education, health, the legal system, the media, and the economic system—may very well produce an ontology of subhumanism that considers Black Americans below the human standard of White Americans and explains killings of African Americans, including the killing of George Floyd. The Other is not only different, representing different biological groups, if you use the language of scientific racism, but the Other is below the standards of "us" humans, a substandard, and supposedly everyone has the same feeling. That is what an ontology of subhumanism is based on, combined with actions, violent actions that can be enacted on the bodies of Black Americans.

DW: I have one other clarifying question about subhumanism. In the multiculturalism courses I teach, we talk a lot about implicit racism. Does that frame make sense for thinking about subhumanism as well? Does it make sense to think about subhumanism as an implicit set of processes that operate without one's awareness?

TT: Absolutely. That is the idea of ontologies—that they are behind one's back, so to say. They are implicit, unconscious, or we are not aware of them. I suggest that psychology operates with an implicit machine model. You ask a traditional psychologist, "Do you have a machine model in mind when you do research?" and they would say, "No, I don't think of my participants as machines." This would be an implicit ontology. It is not an explicit model, although some researchers may believe that there is no difference between machines and humans. Psychologists inherit, habituate, and socialize in the practices of doing research; one socializes into how experimental research is done. Once fully immersed in the everyday practices of research, one conducts research without realizing the actual hidden assumptions; one is not aware of how it happened that one does things a certain way and implicitly assumes that one is at the forefront of psychological science

because one was trained by the best psychologists. Theoretical psychologists need to reconstruct, against a self-understanding in the discipline of objectivity, how the machine model plays out in theories by not allowing the full range of individual agency, let alone the possibility of collective agency, in overturning existing conditions. To be fair, some people implicitly operate with an ontology of subhumanism when they accept and support certain institutional or personal behaviors against migrants or Blacks, or they can be explicit in their fascist being, thinking, and doing. Subhumanism plays a role in both scenarios, but mostly implicitly.

DW: As with racism, virtually no one is going to say, "I'm a subhumanist."

TT: Exactly!

Revealing Hidden Assumptions of Psychology within a Neoliberal Political Order

DW: Speaking of things that are implicit, it seems that a common theme in your scholarship is an elucidation of hidden assumptions or implicit practices. Your work lays bare many of the things that are somewhat hidden as part of a neoliberal political order.

TT: I would distinguish three streams. The first stream looks at implicit assumptions in the theoretical foundations of psychology pertaining to ontology, epistemology, and ethics. For instance, some of my work has focused on epistemological violence (Teo, 2008). Empirical psychologists can commit forms of violence, what I call epistemological violence, without awareness. This is not to deny that some people are aware of what they are doing. The question for me was, How does this happen? How does it happen that you find scientific racist work in psychology? Scientific racism draws on empirical research

while using advanced methods and sophisticated empirical tools. Where does epistemological violence happen, now and in the past?

My argument is that there is no one-to-one relationship between results and the interpretation of results. If you choose an interpretation of results that brings harm to a group of people, then you've committed a form of epistemological violence. Let's assume that you find an empirical difference between group A and B; then you argue that it's in the nature of B to be X, and X has a negative meaning in the culture—even when there are equally viable alternative interpretations possible; and the study itself does not address nature. Then, you may have committed a form of violence once you present an interpretation of difference as knowledge (group A is by nature less intelligent than group B). Epistemological violence is often an implicit practice in psychology and does not only apply to racialized differences. One can commit epistemological violence when it comes to gender, sexual preferences, ability-disability, class—whatever social category you choose. The interpretation of differences is underdetermined, and some interpretations are not necessarily violent and do not bring harm to one group of people; but if "I" choose an interpretation that brings harm to a group of people and present this interpretation as knowledge, "I" may have committed epistemological violence. This stream of argumentation is not alien to traditional psychologists who realize that interpretations of data are not determined by the data.

The second stream of reflection and argumentation about implicit practices does not pertain to aspects of empirical psychology but to the idea that psychology itself is a neoliberal discipline. If you look at the discipline and practice of psychology as a whole, from a metatheoretical perspective, you realize that psychology has contributed to

controlling and adapting people to the neoliberal status quo. From a historical point of view, the problem reaches back to the beginnings of capitalism and its consequences for mental life as well as for psychology. Theoretical psychologists like to discuss the fragmented status of psychology as something negative or positive (see Teo, 2010b). Yet, the fragmented understanding of the psychological subject matter is itself the result of the development of modern and capitalist societies and institutions. I could be interested in your subjectivity in its totality, but as a representative of an institution, I am not. Working in a modern institution, I am only interested in aspects of your mentality. In the sphere of work, "I" as a psychologist am interested in your performance, motivation, leadership, or interpersonal qualities, in your punctuality, whether you identify with a company or not; in the educational system, I am interested in your scholastic abilities; in the prison system, I am interested in whether you are going to reoffend or not; in the legal system, I am interested in the reliability of your eyewitness account; in the military, I am interested in the acuity of your senses, in your eye-hand coordination, or in your qualities as a military leader, soldier, or sniper.

Modern institutions have a very specific interest in your mental life. One could make the argument that modern institutions have contributed to the subdivision of mental life. Thus, the development of modern culture and the development of capitalist society makes it very difficult to bring back the totality of subjectivity into an integrated whole. Psychologists as part of modern or capitalist institutions are interested in particular aspects of your mental life. This has been accelerated in recent developments of the capitalist economy, of what we can call neoliberal capitalism, that combines an economy with an ideology and is interested in you as an entrepreneurial being (Teo, 2018a). To what degree

do you embody the entrepreneurial self? Can you sell not only goods and services but yourself? What commodities of your self can you market? Again, no psychologists would admit that they operate with a concept of *homo neoliberalus*. It is an implicit assumption that guides psychological work.

To repeat, in neoliberal ideology, the psychologist is no longer interested, let's say, in your spiritual life unless you can commodify it, make money with it, or use it. The psychologist is not interested in any particular aspect of your subjectivity unless it's part of an entrepreneurial neoliberal "form of subjectivity" (Teo, 2018a). I think we can make the historical argument that we had a differentiation of forms of life in capitalism, based on different interests in different institutions and systems, and that this differentiation has morphed into a single form, the neoliberal form of subjectivity. Thus, your aesthetic self, your spiritual self, your ethical self, and so on is only relevant to the degree that it fits into a neoliberal form of subjectivity. In neoliberalism, your artistic subjectivity counts only if you can make money with it. You have differentiation and uniformization at the same time. These processes need to be theorized and analyzed in psychology.

Finally, there is another assumption connected to neoliberalism: the idea that we need to adapt to the status quo, produce happiness through accepting existing conditions, and can change only ourselves. Psychology does not conceive of how we could change our conditions of life, collectively, in groups or in society. When people say, "You can only change yourself," I would say, "You can change yourself, but more importantly, humans can also change their shared life conditions." Although this idea is undervalued in psychology and may even be experienced as counterintuitive, it is a possibility of human life. The idea may require collective action and solidarity. That is another notion of critical

psychology that is important to me: conceiving not only *what is* but also *what is possible*. Indeed, the idea has a long history that goes back to the beginnings of psychology.

DW: It seems to me that psychology is interested in what is possible within an individual's intrapsychic life insofar as it helps with productivity or happiness but not so much in terms of what is possible for societal change.

TT: I agree. For that reason, critical psychology has developed.

DW: As you were talking about the fragmentation of psychology, I was thinking about the problem in psychology of constructing humans as just the sum of a set of variables. Those variables may shift somewhat, but they are basically already determined and so constrain at the outset how we understand the human mind and behavior. And then psychology can proceed in a fragmented fashion, where one can isolate a small set of variables and conduct some statistical models on them. Would you see that playing a role as well?

TT: German critical psychology labeled mainstream psychology a *psychology of variables* (Holzkamp, 1983). This means that we can identify mainstream psychology by the requirement to transform everything into a variable, into something that varies and thus, can be quantified and analyzed by statistical means. This brings us back to what we discussed before: the need for psychology to emulate its idol of the natural sciences. Historians and theoreticians of psychology have reconstructed experimentation, operationalization, quantification, and the emergence of variables in psychology. For instance, variables, which used to be a tool for managing certain problems, became a psychological ontology (O'Doherty & Winston, 2014). All that we are is variables, and this mindset requires critical inquiry.

In an article that I am writing at the moment, I suggest that methods have an *object-intentionality* and that they try to do justice to the object. One needs to ask oneself, What kind of objects are we dealing with in psychology, and are our methods doing justice to them? We can further ask whether we are trying to do justice to persons or to an abstract concept, such as natural science. These questions require different streams of reflection. From that perspective, certain methods can do justice or injustice to certain problems. If I want to measure time, I might use, from a historical perspective, the Hipp chronoscope, an instrument that allowed psychologists to measure time. That instrument was important in the development of experimental psychology and was intended to do justice to reaction time. But the Hipp chronoscope does not allow us to measure temperature or other qualities. The question remains, Which instrument does justice towards a given object? Under what circumstance does the ontology of variables do justice to your mental life? At what point does a variable scheme no longer do justice to human subjectivity?

Community Engagement with Research

TT: At the point where variables no longer do justice to the topic, we must switch to other methods, or other methodologies—that is an important assumption of critical psychology. But it goes further: we should not decide the move to qualitative methods in a solipsistic fashion; we must involve the people who are researched. This is, of course, a principle in participatory action research and other community-based research practices. It is not "me," the researcher, who decides on the method. If I believe that I, sitting in the ivory tower in my armchair, can make all decisions about method, then I have probably failed as a critical psychologist. The decision has to be made in conversation and dialogue with community

members who are impacted by the decision. This is another important element in critical psychology when it comes to methodology.

DW: Right. What I have found in some of the worlds that I work in, where I conduct research with Indigenous communities, is that there is definitely more of a shift towards some of the things that you have been talking about, such as engaging with community, working with community interests, and so forth. Yet so much of that research is still strongly guided, for example, by funding agencies, journals, and disciplinary constraints that hem in the community engagement to an extent.

TT: Indeed. A critical reflection of science has to include what has been labeled the context of discovery. In other words, what questions are asked? Why? Who is funding? What do agencies want? Who are the gatekeepers? What is power interested in and what is it not invested in? For example, Lisa Cosgrove and her colleagues' (2006) work on financial conflicts of interest in the context of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM) should be considered here. That is one way of understanding science. The traditional context of justification is another stream of reflection; questions about epistemology, methodology, sample size, statistical tests, and so on come into play here. Equally important is what I call the context of interpretation, or how results are interpreted, with or about people, and then the context of application, where we make decisions about what is done with research in terms of consequences. It is a fourth stream of reflection.

Critical investigations involve all four streams of reflection and address the degree to which the context of discovery influences the context of justification. Beyond granting agencies, I personally am more interested in whether psychology makes people into problems or whether we work on problems that marginalized people encounter in a given

environment. Indeed, Indigenous people in Canada have been made into problems through research. Yet, critical psychology can work on the problems that Indigenous peoples encounter in Canada in collaboration with Indigenous people. Even a strategy that simply looks at empirical differences between groups can make communities into a problem. This has not only happened with Indigenous people but with all kinds of marginalized people (Teo, 2004).

Again, the question is for me whether we make, for instance, LGBTQ+ communities and individuals into problems, as has been done historically, or are we working on the problems that the communities and individuals encounter in a particular country such as Canada or the United States. The focus on empirical difference has also been criticized in critical disability studies that for a long time expressed its critique of psychology because psychology, with its focus on deficits, has made disability into a problem. Again, to reiterate, from a critical perspective, work on problems that persons with disabilities encounter in Canada would be the ethical-scientific alternative.

There is another strategy that can be observed in psychology beyond making people into problems and/or working on problems that people encounter: This is where psychologists ignore people altogether and simply focus on their own career. One can easily find this form of academic subjectivity at universities. People there become a means to an end in which “I” can further my publication record and so forth. Communities, people, and persons in this strategy are not an end in and of themselves. From a critical perspective with a moral and ethical dimension, communities would be considered an end and not a means, particularly when it comes to academia. What I have learned from people who have worked in this context is that Indigenous communities are aware of this problem

and have become more reluctant to participate in research in which they are just used as a means to an end or when psychologists are not really there to understand their problems and to provide possible solutions.

I'm suggesting that it might become more difficult to do research on marginalized groups should the communities refuse to participate. Hopefully, that feeds back into what you address as an issue, disciplinary requirements that hinder research with and for communities. Such disciplinary requirements and funding agencies will change when people push back against a research strategy that sees the study of marginalized communities as a means for something else. Being optimistic, I have seen improvements in research when it comes to marginalized groups in society, in my own lifetime.

DW: I was just about to say, in terms of here in Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research has made genuine reforms in terms of expectations for research with Indigenous peoples in terms of emphasizing participation, community autonomy, and data sovereignty. How those changes actually happen in practice would be important to observe. Nonetheless, there truly is, I think, a real shift that is heartening to see.

Psychology's Response to Teo's Scholarship

DW: Speaking of these shifts in disciplinary practice, to the extent that you are aware, how would you say the field of psychology has responded to your work?

TT: It's difficult to say. Let me approach the problem from a different angle. If I divide my own work into historical, theoretical, and critical contributions, promoting more recently the psychological humanities (Teo, 2017), developing concepts, or what I consider

counter-concepts to existing traditional concepts, then we would have to look into each of these areas.

My historical work was aimed at historians of psychology, with the history of psychology clearly being a recognized subfield within the discipline of psychology, and at teaching the history of psychology (Walsh et al., 2014). In this subfield, there is a very small group of people working, and you would get feedback from the few who have seen your work. In my current work, I have moved away from the history of psychology because history has become a tool for me for understanding current issues. Such an attitude would be a methodological problem in historiography but not in theoretical or critical psychology. I no longer do history for the sake of historiography. My work has shifted to theorizing, where I use historical knowledge to make an argument with the intent of addressing a larger psychological audience.

When it comes to my theoretical and critical work, it's difficult to say how the discipline has responded. I published in 2015 in the *American Psychologist* an article on critical psychology (Teo, 2015) with above average citations, but I'm not sure which mainstream psychologist cites the article and I don't know if it has had any impact on traditional psychology. I think that most psychologists, and this reflects the historical development of psychology into specialty areas, remain very much focused on their own specialty areas, and even general psychology has been in decline. For that reason, one cannot expect recognition and interest in areas outside of people's research, and this also applies to theoretical psychology.

Nevertheless, I tried to develop concepts and ideas for a general psychological audience. For example, my concept of epistemological violence (Teo, 2008) was

specifically aimed not at a critical, theoretical, or postcolonial readership but a mainstream audience. I wanted to draw attention to the possible dangers of producing harmful interpretations, based on empirical difference, against groups of people when alternative interpretations are available. At the same time, many speculative interpretations have been presented as knowledge or fact. I wanted to draw attention to the hermeneutic deficit in the discipline, that is, the tendency to *not* focus on the quality of interpretation and the quality of theorizing. We all know of psychology's focus on the technical aspects of methodology. Yet, there are no courses, manuals, or seminars on how to interpret data or theorize data. Beyond technical methodology, we do not learn how to understand research, how to reflect on our own research, how to articulate the meaning of the possibilities and limitations of studies, or how to critically assess knowledge more generally. We like to talk about distributions, scales, measures, constructs, instruments, and statistical tests, in short about technical expertise, but not about the meaning of knowledge in psychology. We do not have courses on that. When I ask students, What is psychological knowledge?—admittedly a difficult question—I usually encounter silence.

Many of my studies target a mainstream audience, but it's very difficult for me to say whether they have had any impact beyond a small group of people. Let me give you a concrete example: In *Canadian Psychology* I published an article on the term 'Caucasian' (Teo, 2009). In this paper with the obscure title "Psychology without Caucasians," I made the argument that the concept of the Caucasian is a completely unscientific concept. You can go back to Blumenbach (1795), who coined the term, and you know all of his assumptions that underlie the concept have been falsified, for example, the assumption that the cradle of humanity is the Caucasus. My question then is, Why do we use a

nonscientific term in psychology? My question is not about political correctness; it's about scientific correctness! The article has a few citations, but as we know, the term is still widely used in psychology; I see and hear the term used on a regular basis. That we use the term in North America and not in Germany has historical, cultural, and political roots. We do not use the equally unscientific concept of the 'Aryan'; nobody would say, "My sample consisted of 150 Aryans." Yet we use the term Caucasian, which is equally nonsensical. If one really wants to be a natural scientist, then one should not use completely unscientific words in one's science! Epistemic ignorance is no longer an excuse for its usage.

DW: It is pretty remarkable. I frequently see the term Caucasian being used in manuscripts and theses I review. I pretty regularly advise the use of a different term. But it's interesting that even something so trivial and so obviously unscientific remains so entrenched in psychology. So, you can only imagine, for the deeper systemic and critical issues that you raise, how much resistance there would be. It strikes me that part of the difficulty of being a theoretical psychologist is that one's work is easily ignored. For example, I can imagine your *American Psychologist* article (Teo, 2015) is making a difference for people. People are using it, and it helps their own scholarship or their own practice. But then for everyone else, it can just be ignored. There is a proliferation of so many journals, so many voices, that it's hard to change the field. There are those moments where something really makes a splash, in the spirit of Thomas Kuhn's (1962) *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. But it is very hard to see those changes. I have found that one of the more interesting sites to see resistances or impediments to my own work, is more on the local scene—the things that come up with colleagues in department meetings, or about curriculum, or in dissertation

defenses, or whatever it might be. I wonder if you might speak to that just a little bit, about perhaps some of the resistances and impediments to your work.

TT: Using the example of the term Caucasian, I have had a variety of experiences ranging from agreement, disagreement, to ignorance. Often, psychologists say to me: "Indeed, this is a good argument. It might be scientifically correct, what you say. But we all know what the term means." It is ironic that psychologists who commit to science are left with the argument that we all know what it means, which would confirm the position of postmodern psychologists. It is a weak argument if you commit yourself to the rhetoric of science. I think that challenging the status quo, pointing to significant deficits when it comes to concepts, ontology, epistemology, and ethics of the discipline, are not particularly welcome. I have used examples from ontology and epistemology, but when it comes to ethical deficits I would like to mention the torture scandal in the American Psychological Association and the amount of resistance in the discipline and profession when it came to addressing the scandal (Aalbers & Teo, 2017).

Interrogating Hermeneutic Deficits in Psychology

TT: Coming back to your question about resistance, we could talk about the defense against unpleasant knowledge. It is understandable that psychologists do not like it when hermeneutic deficits are pointed out, even if you do it in a nice way or when you just ask questions about research, such as, Could you interpret these results within a different framework? Would the epistemic outcome be different if you do that? Could there be different, even contradictory, conclusions? Why did you choose that framework and not another one? How did you decide what interpretation is the best interpretation of the data

when the data allows for a variety of different interpretations? Such questions startle students and faculty alike. The idea that one could analyze data from a different theoretical framework, that interpretations and theories are underdetermined by results, that the meaning of results could change if you choose a different theoretical framework, are challenging. Even more, if you ask why a student is committed to a particular framework, you receive confused answers. Some students have answered honestly and have told me that the reason is that their supervisor has worked in this framework. Such observations and the literature point to the hermeneutic deficit in the discipline. Critical psychology entails pointing to those deficits.

Hermeneutic deficits also support the importance of good theorizing in psychology, which is another goal of my work. I understand that, even when you provide the best argument, holding up the mirror and asking psychologists to look into the mirror, what they see in the mirror is not necessarily the great science that they think they have engaged in. The mirror points to a problematic discipline. Pointing this out will obviously evoke resistances and complaints, or ignorance. In society more generally, if somebody challenges the status quo, many people don't really like to hear such challenges. We could address resistance to hermeneutic deficits in the discipline and profession through a history of science, philosophy of science, or sociology of science, but also through a psychology of science. Kuhn (1962) has alluded to that in reference to psychological processes involved when it comes to accepting a paradigm or a scientific revolution. Let me give you an example. If you work for 25–30 years in a paradigm, and you are very successfully advancing in this paradigm or, if you prefer, *research program* when it comes to psychology, if somebody then says this research framework has significant problems,

many persons will not just give up on that research program that they have accepted, had positive experiences with, and on which their successes are based. To give up on it would be very difficult, from a psychological perspective.

When I suggest that psychology should incorporate the psychological humanities (Teo, 2017), there will be resistance for sociopolitical and psychological reasons. Psychologists know what is rewarded in science and which research is associated with power and money, to use a simplified explanation. Psychology and psychologists want to align themselves with disciplines associated with those characteristics and not with disciplines that may even experience contempt. The humanities, as we know, have been under attack for the last 20–30 years, and longer of course if you assume a historical perspective. Why would you align psychology with something that has no power? Why would you align psychology with something that increases uncertainty and that might be confusing because of its complexity? As a result, you find reactions that emphasize the idea that "We are a science!" Even psychoanalysis is believed to be a real science, a self-misunderstanding, as Habermas (1968) pointed out, because it does not understand its hermeneutic character.

Still, I make the epistemic case for the psychological humanities. The central idea is that we can learn about mental life from the humanities, from historiography, philosophy, social and political theory, anthropology, cultural studies, postcolonial thought, economic theory, and the arts. I understand that such a project is sociologically, institutionally, and politically not rewarded, but it is needed. For personal, institutional, financial, and political reasons, it will be difficult to align psychology with the humanities (Teo, 2019b).

Epistemic reasons, intellectual legitimacy, and even evidence that supports incorporating these disciplines seem to be secondary.

The Challenge of Epistemic Modesty in a Discipline That Rewards Grandiosity

DW: There seems to be a kind of irony here. We have a prototype of the scientist who really wants to be proven wrong. You hear this a lot in public discourse: "As a scientist, my goal is to be proven wrong and I need to have humility." I don't doubt that there are scientists who really do their best to embody that spirit. You may see something like the epistemological modesty you have written about (Teo, 2019c)—more likely when it comes to something very narrow, perhaps pertaining to falsification in the Popperian sense. But when it comes to something that is a more substantive challenge to one's assumptions, there is a lot less modesty. I mean, we can just look at the widespread but controversial practice of null hypothesis significance testing using p-values of .05.

TT: You are right about the paths of modesty. My argument for epistemic modesty was not specifically focused on the ritual of null hypothesis testing in psychology (Gigerenzer, 2014) but on the values or virtues that scientists want to embrace more generally. We still find researchers who show epistemic modesty in certain areas, as you suggest, but we can also observe the opposite trend, what I have called epistemic grandiosity (Teo, 2019b). It can easily be observed with researchers who are experts in one area pretending to be public experts in all areas. Those public scientists, a more accurate term than public intellectuals, present themselves as experts in nature, society, and culture and are able to comment on any topic thrown at them (e.g., in media interviews).

Consider the convincing case of epistemic modesty. Most research fields have become so broad and complex that it is actually impossible to be an epistemic expert on all disciplines. Even in one field such as psychology, where you have millions of studies, and even if you commit to the project of general psychology and express an interest in the totality of mental life or the whole of subjectivity, it is impossible to be an up-to-date expert on all psychosocial issues. Given the constant contributions to knowledge in various areas and at the same time the impossibility of being an expert in all knowledge domains, the intellectual limitations of each individual, and the fact that we take theoretical shortcuts, epistemic modesty would be a necessary virtue. I ask, then, a common move in my own theoretical work, Why is this not happening? Why is there not more epistemic modesty to be found?

I argue that endorsing this virtue is not happening because under neoliberal capitalism you need to embody the virtues of an entrepreneurial, academic self. In consequence, researchers exaggerate their contributions, are grandiose about their findings, market and sell their ideas, and overemphasize the impact of their results when translating their research to the public. Neoliberal academia and neoliberal science, where each researcher becomes a salesperson, promote values that are the opposite of epistemic modesty. It would make you a bad salesperson if you preface your research by mentioning that you actually don't have any clear answers, that you are dealing with an extremely difficult and maybe too complex problem to give definitive answers, that you are well aware of the limitations of your own framework, which may be not only limited but even biased, that you are coming from a certain intellectual, social, and cultural background, and that what you suggest needs contextualization, which would be the appropriate way to approach

research in psychology. Your audience will lose interest quickly. Contrast that with a researcher who prefaces findings by saying, “Let me tell you what’s going on. I have the best answer for that problem. I can explain perfectly why this is happening,” or who compares their findings to those of Darwin or Galileo.

Academic grandiosity is rewarded in the larger system of neoliberalism, whereas epistemic modesty would be an appropriate intrinsic value developing out of the reality of the growing breadth and complexity of science and knowledge. It is impossible in one discipline or even in one subdiscipline to follow the unmanageable number of books, chapters, and articles published. Epistemic modesty as a virtue also shows the economic colonization of scientific values and that extrinsic characteristics such as marketability, the entrepreneurial self, and loud, extraverted grandiosity are rewarded. Of course, if you could transform modesty into a marketable entity, it would have a neoliberal value as well.

DW: This surely has consequences in terms of the replication crisis in psychology, as well as issues of unethical data manipulation, that we see in social psychology and other branches of psychology.

TT: I have not published on this topic, but I worked with a PHD student who made a convincing argument that we need to connect some of the high-profile cases of fraud in social psychology to neoliberal thinking and doing. Again, you have a conflict between scientific core values such as academic honesty and transparency and the reality of fraud and manipulation, the latter referring to borderline activities in research that make it difficult to replicate research—not mentioning here for a moment the cultural and historical dimensions of psychological research that prevent replication. If it is the case that fraud is increasing, then we need to ask why. Academic fraudsters who have been

interviewed mention the enormous pressures they experienced. They mentioned that they felt stress at often prestigious universities or institutions to publish original work. At a certain point of pressure, they moved to making data up. Such an instance is sociologically and psychologically interesting yet not surprising. What makes an academic commit research fraud? To what degree is it an internal problem of character? Do we need to understand the fraudulent person, or their character, in connection with relationships, academic life-worlds, and sociopolitical and economic-ideological contexts? In my theory of subjectivity, in a theory of academic subjectivity, this nexus between systems, relationships, and the person needs to be understood in order to understand phenomena such as academic fraud. Clearly, some of those phenomena you mention need to be analyzed within the developments of neoliberal academia.

Clinical and Educational Applications

DW: We've talked quite a bit about research and scientific production. I wonder if we might shift just a little bit to talk about psychological practice. I know that you have clinical psychology students in some of your courses. I am curious how your work has been received by practitioners or budding practitioners of psychology.

TT: Given the current problems in society, academia, and psychology, you can choose between an epistemic or an ethical-practical approach to praxis, by which I mean critical practice. You can theorize praxis problems or you can do something about praxis problems or combine both. My own academic focus has been on theorizing problems, always with an emancipatory-practical *intent*, a term I borrow from Habermas, who suggested that his philosophizing as a public intellectual has a practical intent. I am not sure if this is an

excuse for not doing enough in praxis when I say that I have a practical intent in my epistemic reflections. When I develop a concept such as *epistemological violence*, it should offer a mirror to the discipline, but I also want people who are harmed through research to use it even when they are not fully aware of all the technical details in a study. When racialized students encounter in their textbooks statements about naturalized race difference in IQ, or when they are confronted with the banality of a graph on differences, they can not only say that empirical differences allow for a variety of interpretations, let alone what is mean by a Western concept, they can respond to what is presented as knowledge as a form of epistemological violence. When marginalized groups and persons encounter statements about their supposed deficits, statements they understand as harmful, they can invoke the concept of epistemological violence. In that sense, I aim at practical intent for seemingly abstract ideas.

In the process of psychologization that we go through in Western countries, I want to develop counter-psychologization, counter-concepts for and with people (Teo, 2018b). To clarify, in theoretical and historical psychology, we talk a lot about psychologization, the fact that people use more and more psychological concepts and theories to understand themselves and other people and even to comprehend the social world. Part of the success of psychology can be found in the reality that once people explain everything in the world through psychological concepts, you have a complete psychologization of the world. *Neuroplasticity* would be a more recent example for the success of neuropsychological concepts. Indeed, there are countless psychological concepts that people use to understand themselves, others, and economic life. When former President Obama identifies an empathy deficit in American society, he uses a psychological category to analyze the

United States. From a critical perspective, empathy deficit might be one aspect, but American society's problems are basically due to the enormous inequalities in the political-economic system, as a starting point.

The process of psychologization represents a real trend that we can theorize. Here, my point is that instead of providing traditional psychological concepts to make sense of the world, I want critical psychologists to develop counter-concepts. I understand epistemological violence as such a counter-concept in order to make the case for understanding what is going on, let's say, in the academic literature. In current public debates, *systemic racism* would be a nonpsychological counter-concept that specifically aims at not psychologizing social issues. In order to use that concept, people do not have to study scientific data sets.

That intent of theorizing for practical purposes represents one stream. A more obvious stream is teaching, where critical work means preparing students for the conditions of the possibility and the necessity of reflexivity when it concerns psychology. I emphasize asking questions about psychology as a hermeneutic tool because psychology students are socialized in a very strict process that ends in stating that psychology is a science. They often are blind towards the problems that psychology has as a discipline and practice and to the power that it has. I hope that marginalized persons and students use critical concepts, such as epistemological violence, psychological humanities, subhumanism, epistemic modesty, hyperscience, collective agency and resistance, and critical psychology more generally, and I hope that they are skeptical of concepts such as the Caucasian or methods such as the twin method (Teo & Ball, 2009). I hope that clinical students who attend my classes on the historical and theoretical foundations of psychology consider some of the

critical theorizing that we have done. I am realistic enough to know that this might not always be successful. But this is not an excuse for avoiding trying or for not continuing to develop ideas with a practical intent.

As an educator, I theorize unjust conditions, which is a limitation because it would require action. Still, I believe it is important that the fight against unjust conditions begins, at least for the privileged, with an understanding of the sources of injustice. I teach clinical students, for instance, how income and wealth inequality can lead to health and mental health problems, following Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) work that shows that societies with higher income inequality also have more problems when it comes to mental health. Such knowledge sets the conditions for the possibility that they will take this into account when doing clinical work. The ideal solution, from a theoretical point of view, would be large-scale change, but large-scale change is difficult given the complexities of structure and power in modern societies. I accept and support small-scale change, like in community psychology, that helps homeless people, communities in distress, groups that encounter discrimination, mental health issues, and so forth. I applaud these efforts, but from a theoretical perspective helping 50 homeless people or more will not necessarily solve the problem of homelessness. This problem requires large-scale change, which at this time is difficult to envision for many people. I understand that as well.

DW: It seems to be implicit in your argument that psychology itself cannot be expected to make that change.

TT: Yes, indeed. Traditional psychology, as we know it, focuses always on the individual or, let me be more precise, on *individualization*. Research psychology, which relies on statistical methods, actually does not really care about the unique person but is rather more

concerned about the aggregate. That even applies to social psychology, with streams of community psychology being exempt. Individualization means that the individual is the locus of solution. Yet, individualizing solutions means adapting and controlling individuals rather than allowing individuals to consider changing their societal life conditions. In that sense, not the individual but individualization is at the core of traditional practice. I believe this brings us back to the concept of agency and to considering not only adaptive behavior or consumer choice but also agency as a form of collective action that can change structural realities.

I follow here Holzkamp (1983) that it is in our nature, as human beings, to change our environment. Indeed, we have historical evidence that we not only adapted to our world but that we were able to change that world. It is in our ontology and in our societal nature to be able to collectively change life conditions. Despite the more pessimistic experience that it is difficult to change the lifeworld and the system, it is intellectually and practically important to emphasize a collective capability, beyond looking at agency from an individualistic perspective. Emphasizing collective agency invokes concepts such as solidarity, which is a concept lost in traditional psychology but is used in social and political theory. Not seeing the possibility of collective agency, or only seeing it in the negative, is part of epistemic ignorance, or a form of nihilism. Understanding collective agency means also that psychology connects to the psychological humanities, where we can think about those forms of activity that have brought about social change and social justice.

Hope and Change

DW: As you were talking about the potential for human change, I've thought about how it is interesting that, on the one hand, I could see some people interpreting your work as somewhat pessimistic, due to its deep criticisms of psychology and society. But what I am hearing in what you are saying actually strikes me as a deeply optimistic frame about what it means to be human and the ability of communities and societies to change, even radically.

TT: I am a dialectical pessimist and optimist at the same time. Pessimist because of the overwhelming problems in nature, society, and psychology. Optimist because, I guess, it is the only thing left when dealing with these problems if you believe that justice remains an existential principle. I also believe that we can fight until death, as limited as this fight might be. From an existential and even ethical perspective, from the perspective of maintaining meaning in a personal life, what would be the alternative to hope? Once you have answered Camus's (1955) most serious philosophical question, the question of suicide, you need to move forward. The alternative would be nihilism. I should mention that when I use the term nihilism, I do not mean it in a religious sense but in the psychosocial meaning that we cannot change anything but ourselves. The idea that we still can change the world is the opposite of nihilism.

Hope is an important principle, as the socialist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1986) argued in his three volumes. Hope has important psychological, existential, and spiritual elements and, as his history of social utopias shows, it is part of our humanity. We envision alternatives to the status quo. If you come politically from a socialist background, and in the North American context I should emphasize that I detest any form of authoritarianism and totalitarianism, right or left, then the idea of a better and fairer future for all of

humanity, and not for my privileged self that is doing fine, remains an important source to combat nihilism as well as to engender critical analyses about what is wrong and what could be done in this world.

My own oscillation between despair and hope, given our current situation, is perhaps the outcome of a negative dialectic (Adorno, 1990) combined with the principle of hope (Bloch, 1986). Critical analyses can move into despair—consider racism—but despair can move into hope—consider the current social movements against violence against Black lives supported by varieties of people. Then again, a recognition of the obstacles and calcified structures that are very difficult to change may lead to pessimism, as do some of the choices of some Americans and Canadians in the COVID-19 crisis. If you think about the global problems that we encounter with increasing wealth inequality in the social domain, the destruction of the environment in the natural domain, the reemergence of the fascist mentality, necropolitics during the pandemic, and systemic racist actions by state agents, one could fall back into pessimism. At the same time, there remain reasons for hope. The optimistic strategy is to move forward with hope that we actually can do things about these problems until our last breath. It is part of our mental life and our nature, but it is a path that needs to be taken.

DW: When it comes to psychology as a discipline, or in its relationship to the humanities or other disciplines, what changes have you seen that give you hope for change in the future? Any emerging hopeful trends you see, such as among students or the rising generation?

TT: In psychology we have a similar dialectical process. Consider our professional organizations. I see positive change in the APA, where issues of social justice, working on behalf of the marginalized, issues of racism, and many other social issues have been

addressed. At the same time, we have observed negative changes in the APA, the marketization of psychology, and even changes to the ethics code that have allowed so-called enhanced interrogation techniques, in reality, torture, to follow the law—as interpreted by lawyers with a narrow interest in fighting foreign enemies—instead of following the higher-standard ethics code. You have these dialectics, or if you use another metaphor, "One step forward and two steps back," or if you are more optimistic, "Two steps forward and one step back." The complexity of societal, institutional, or intellectual realities need to be kept in mind when hoping for psychology.

My experience with students is very similar. I have had some students who seem to have zero interest in intellectual matters, and I have asked them why they are at university. Some students have answered this question by saying, "Well, my mother has a real estate business, and I just need a degree. Psychology seemed easy enough." You can be pessimistic about such statements, or you can analyze and theorize them. What has happened in the world of education that some, perhaps still only a few, students develop a completely instrumental, cost-benefit analysis of education as a means to an end? Indeed, the neoliberal mindset can help explain why some students have no interest in content and see only instrumental value in taking psychology or being at university. On the other hand, I also see undergraduate students who are advanced theoretically, ethically, and in terms of knowledge. When you see the positive and the negative at the same time, when you encounter dialectical processes, why not recognize the positive?

In research, my late colleague David Rennie (2012) studied the amount of qualitative research in psychology and found that the amount was marginal. We may see increasing qualitative research in psychology, published in journals and other places, and we may

think that psychology is changing. Even though his original study is now nearly 20 years old, the total number of qualitative research articles in psychology has remained minuscule compared to the number of quantitative studies, based on what critics have called *positivist* or what we call *naïve empiricist* practices. This brings us back to the dialectics of despair and hope. There is hope that qualitative research may change the discipline or at least that there is a place for psychologists to publish qualitative material, aiming for a broader horizon. At the same time, when you compare the numbers of quantitative and qualitative publications, you realize that things have not changed substantially.

DW: The same can be said for research in psychology pertaining to ethnic minority groups or racialized groups. I was a coauthor of a systematic review on that literature, and there really has not been much change in recent decades (Hartmann et al., 2013). It may seem like there has been just because there are so many more publications. But, comparatively, the change is pretty minimal. I want to hope that things really are changing with the current generation of students. I guess we will see.

TT: Indeed, we will see. As mentioned before, I am impressed by some students, and disappointed by other students with no interest in the subject matter. Yet, my point was that we should not focus on disappointment and take this personally but theorize such phenomena. Why don't some students want to study? This is a fascinating question when we take the original meanings of student, education, and university into account. Clearly, meanings change, and under the realities of neoliberal capitalism, young people need to show degrees, not for the sake of the knowledge they have but to show that they can commit to something, that they can accept orders by authorities, that they have engaged in soft skills such as "communication"—the hidden curriculum, as it has been called—in

order to get a job in a competitive labor market. If instrumental reasons dominate the lifeworlds of students, then it would not be unreasonable to dedicate the least amount of work and effort to knowledge and just focus on marketable skills.

Instrumental thinking, cost-benefit analyses, and utilitarian attitudes students observe from their professors as well as in teaching, research, and service reinforce instrumentality in academia. Students of psychology might wonder about future jobs and understand the marketability of degrees, with some studies showing that the financial value of a psychology degree is low. We should therefore not wonder about indifference towards learning, combined with the issue of the irrelevance of some material taught in psychology, as we discussed before. Apathy towards educational opportunities to develop traditional or critical knowledge about an area is not personally disappointing once we theorize it. What is going on in our culture and society regarding knowledge? Experiences and analyses corroborate that I should be both pessimistic and optimistic at the same time about the next generation of psychologists.

Anticipated Future Directions of Teo's Scholarship

DW: Speaking of the future, what do you imagine are the future directions of your thought, your scholarship?

TT: From a theoretical point of view, I want to advance a critical theory of subjectivity as well as work on the relationship between epistemology and ethics. From a professional point of view, I want to provide space for the psychological humanities as well as for critical psychology (Teo, 2014). For the theory of subjectivity, I start out with the idea that we need a theory of subjectivity because it is arguably an important subject matter of

psychology. If you read through historical material, you can see that we have a fascination with subjectivity, which could contribute to overcoming divisions in psychology, when integrating knowledge. Strangely, we don't have a theory of subjectivity in academic psychology.

The next question is, of course, what are the elements of a theory of subjectivity? I suggest that we should make a conceptual distinction between what I call sociosubjectivity, intersubjectivity, and intrasubjectivity. Sociosubjectivity, a neologism, refers to the fact that our subjectivity is culturally, historically, and societally constituted or embedded. This sociosubjectivity is of course connected with intersubjectivity and intrasubjectivity. Using this schema, I want to challenge social deterministic theories that emphasize the external as well also purely individualistic theories that focus on internal processes; psychoanalysis would be an example of the latter. I connect these conceptual elements by suggesting that we have to understand their nexus if we want to understand subjectivity. We experience how culture, society, and history play a role in our own subjectivity, how these dimensions may be mediated for instance through personal relations, peers, friends, parents, teachers, and so forth but also by personal idiosyncrasies, self-interpretations, and activities. The entanglement between sociosubjectivity, intersubjectivity, and intrasubjectivity makes subjectivity unique and irreplaceable, which would be a metaphysical element in a theory of subjectivity.

From a social-deterministic or sociological perspective, the problem arises as to why everyone is not the same. For instance, why do some people develop mental health issues in the context of income inequality while others do not? I do not refer to personal character or individual differences as an answer but to the fact that if you grow up in a particular

economic context, culture, and time, you are to a certain degree similar; but you are also different at the same time. There will not be a perfect clone of you who is identical in their subjectivity. Even if you were able to clone a person of your age, the clone will develop in a different path and assume their own subjectivity. In that sense, neither sociological nor biological determinism can account for uniqueness or irreplaceability. What makes one unique is this nexus of personal interpretations, experiences, interpersonal relationships, and the meaning that one attributes to them, embedded in cultures and subcultures, one's position in societies, the historical stage, and institutions. I also want to emphasize that we suture ourselves into society, or immerse ourselves into culture, so that we do not experience society as something outside of us—not to deny that there might be problems in this suturing process.

Another element is, of course, that we cannot neglect *physis*. A theory of subjectivity needs to include not only mentality but also the body. When I speak of the body, I do not just mean the body as a biological entity, or psychological body images that can be measured, but the phenomenological first-person experience of the body. If you think about it, biological realities are relational realities; my height, my cognitive or athletic abilities, abstracting for the moment the sociohistorical constitution of these concepts, only make sense in relation to others. Completely by myself, I would not have language, I would not know if I am tall or short or if I am smart or not. There are also other elements that need to be included in a theory of subjectivity. For example, we need to include the the dynamics of inner life, intrasubjectivity, the fact that we should understand subjectivity in the context of everyday life, and the increasing role of technology, temporality, and power. I am working on such a project.

As mentioned, I am also working on the entanglement of epistemology and ethics, which itself is part of a larger project, not only an intellectual but also an organizational program, that is the psychological humanities. For the project on the relationship between ethics and epistemology, I begin with the intuition, but also arguments and evidence, that ethics and epistemology are closely linked. For example, I am suggesting that method itself is a way of trying to do justice to an object. If it is the case that methods are attempts to do justice to an object, then inherent in every method is a link between ethics and epistemology. I do not mean social justice here; I mean literally doing justice to an object. The idea that method tries to do justice to an object, the *object-intentionality* of method, suggests that a method is always directed towards something else, an object, and in order to understand its quality, we must analyze the degree to which a method does justice to the object.

A similar argument about the relationship between epistemology and ethics has been made by Daston and Galison (2007) in their book on *Objectivity* in which they point out that objectivity is not just an epistemic but also a moral category. Consider when someone calls you out to be more objective. It is a moral call, and you might even be outraged because you think you are objective, that you employ a moral feeling. If the issue were only scientific you would simply focus on what to do in order to achieve what was asked for. “Being objective” is a value and virtue in epistemic endeavors. I want to work more systematically on this problem, but where this project will take me, I do not know at the moment.

All of this is embedded in the program of the psychological humanities, which I hope will be a platform that people can work and identify with. When Wade Pickren and I

assumed co-editorship of *The Review of General Psychology,* the APA Division 1 journal, we specifically invited people to submit papers from the perspective of the psychological humanities. We have published a few papers already within this program. Still, being interested in the history and philosophy of science, and on the background of neoliberal academic criteria, where journals are evaluated in terms of impact factor and other numeric criteria, I realize that a paper from the psychological humanities, with fewer people associated with this program, may decrease the journal's impact. But I am not worried much about it at the moment because the content of knowledge is more important to me than the impact factor of the journal. My point is to do justice to a problem, and if a psychological humanities article does justice to a problem, then there is no reason not to publish it, even if traditional psychologists may think that it is not science.

Concluding Thoughts

DW: Well, we have covered a lot of territory in this interview, and I wonder if we might just try to bring things full circle. How would you frame, through your own work, an ethics of psychology when interpreted in the context of a neoliberal political order?

TT: The ethics of psychology in a neoliberal order requires in my view critical psychology with a critique of neoliberal totalitarianism, a reconstruction of its discursive and material consequences on mental life, and the vision for a better future. This includes, from the perspective of an ethical critique, an analysis of the adaptive functions of the discipline and profession of psychology in this reality. It is an ethical competence to challenge the pathologies of psychology under neoliberal capitalism. In that sense, I understand critical psychology as an ethical project. Because ethics and epistemology are connected, we need

to challenge a psychology that disconnects individual mental life from societal realities. If we do that, we can challenge pathologies not of individuals but of advanced capitalism. This critique will provide a more comprehensive understanding of human mental life. That would be a short answer to a difficult question.

DW: The ethical response for psychology within a neoliberal order is to in fact be critical about it and to mark the contours of what is taking place, how that's impacting one's own work as well as society, and then starting to imagine societal change around it.

TT: Indeed. Let me emphasize again: deconstructive, reconstructive, but also constructive work (Teo, in press) need to go together. We have to criticize and to understand, but we also have the ethical responsibility to develop alternative ideas, an alter-psychology, or an alter-global psychology, at least as a project (Teo & Afsin, 2020). We must develop ideas on how things could be different, developing counterconcepts, new theories, different methodologies and practices. I think all of these things are actually happening in critical psychology, theoretical psychology, and other alternative psychologies. I also understand that there might be a season associated with phases of this work. Critique often occurs at a younger stage of career because you can identify the problems occurring in psychology early on if you pay sufficient attention. Reconstruction requires more work, more knowledge in order to understand why something happened as it did. Finally, construction, at least from an academic perspective, seems to be the most difficult task. On the other hand, everyone is invited to envision a better society and psychology. Maybe it is elitist to assume that this can only happen at an advanced stage of career. If we take the idea of a democratic science seriously, it seems that I have reverted back to a psychology *for* people, which is better than a psychology *about* people but still elitist. The critical need is a

democratic psychology *with* people, an important principle found in the varieties of critical psychology around the world.

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