

Relational Ethics and Epistemology:  
The case for complementary first principles in Psychology

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## **Abstract**

In psychology, where a natural science epistemology holds sway, relationships between the researcher and the researched are usually hierarchical and transactional, bound in procedural and legal ethics. This epistemologically framed and limited view of ethics fails to account for issues of power and privilege, and inequalities in economic and sociocultural structures. We argue that a more complete philosophy of science (and practice) should consist of complementary first principles – relational ethics and epistemology. Valuing relational ethics as a first principle means that how knowledge is produced, and how it is acted on is complementary in importance with what knowledge is produced. Collaborative relationships grounded in sincerity, reciprocity, and shared purpose become the basis for how psychological knowledge is produced, disseminated, and acted upon. Our first case study demonstrates how accountability to cross-sectoral relationships in research processes contributes to societal well-being in multi-cultural New Zealand. The second shows how collaborative relationships between academics contributed to the growth of a more practical and culturally grounded social psychology in Indonesia. These case studies show how taking action in an ethical manner through relationships formed in the process of doing psychology and producing suitable knowledge deepens our conception and practice of psychology as human science.

**Keywords:** Relational ethics, epistemology, first principles, philosophy, interconnectedness

## **Relational Ethics and Epistemology: The case for complementary first principles in Psychology**

While psychology has long privileged epistemology as its “first philosophy”, it has also endured several assaults against this orthodoxy (Cartwright, 1979; Liu & Liu, 1997). Historically, it has weathered these challenges by maintaining a commitment to a natural science epistemology at its centre, while spawning alternatives at the margins. Some of these margins adhere to different philosophies of science (e.g. social constructionism, see Gergen, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and some of these have alternative, applied practices (e.g. community psychology, see Seedat, Duncan, & Lazarus, 2001). Some arise out of social movements (e.g. liberation, Martin-Baro, 1996; or decolonization, Smith, 1999), and some have originated in civilizations with autonomous culture and traditions (Yang, 1999, 2000). Drawing from these margins, and taking lessons from the history (on-going) of their contestation with the centre (Liu & Liu, 1997), we argue that a first philosophy for psychology should consist of *two complementary principles that form a more complete philosophy, of science and practice*. 1) Like Levinas (see Bergo 2015), we argue for ethics as a first principle, and like many community psychology scholars (Fryer & Laing, 2008; Jahoda & Zeisel, 2002; Seedat & Lazarus, 2011) focus attention on the relationships required for, the duties and responsibilities that emerge from, and the value and utility of knowledge produced as a consequence of research, teaching, and practice. We hold that an interconnectedness between people ought to drive relational ethics to be a first principle for psychology. This requires us to consider what knowledge is being sought and why, what are the issues of power and what is the balance of justice, and whose interests are being served. 2) In contrast to traditions of analytical philosophy, where a clean separation is sought between schools of thought, we argue that relational ethics should complement,

augment, and maintain a dialogical relationship with rather than replace epistemological considerations, as complementary and interdependent principles that in totality enable a more complete philosophy of science and practice for psychology.

### ***The Need for Complementary First Principles***

The privileging of epistemology as the first principle in psychological research can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Rationalist school of thought (Liu, 2017). The Cartesian divide of mind and body was core to the development of modern science, and of a natural science approach to social sciences including psychology. Holding epistemology, and more particularly, privileging a natural science epistemology as the first principle determines what sort of knowledge is valued, and how it is supposed to be produced. This templated knowledge production is often engineered by an autonomous, and often self-benefiting researcher creating at the very least, issues of power and disparity, and at worst epistemological violence (Teo, 2010). Practices of ethics in this form of knowledge production are often thin; reduced to hierarchical, formulaic, and bureaucratic processes.

Current ethical processes of psychological research are largely derived from medical research, and thus legalistic ethics. Guidelines such as respect of persons (rights and dignity), beneficence and non-maleficence (do good and no harm), fidelity and integrity (promise keeping and professional conduct), and justice (fairness) dictate the actions and invoke the authority of the researcher towards the subject/participant (Miracle, 2016). These are principles are transacted by the researcher on behalf of his/her institution, in an exchange relationship with the research "subject". Consent is to be gained. Organisations should be cared for and protected. The researcher is responsible for a transparent, honest and confidential process, and there ought to be a careful weighting by the researcher of the

burdens, and benefits of research. These normative ethical rules are steeped in individualism and rooted in a notion of individual human rights, without corresponding notions of reciprocal responsibilities (see Küng, 1997 for discussion). Such normative rules primarily act to legitimate, to provide procedure for, and to police the research process as a *scientific enterprise*. Knowledge is to be extracted from individuals with consent. There is no corresponding injunction to provide benefits to communities from whom this knowledge is extracted from. There is little relational in the contract between the researcher and the researched. The bureaucratic process is legalistic and transactional.

This might be adequate in some situations. For example, when a university ethics committee permits research in psychology on undergraduates through subject pools, besides protection from harm, the student studying first year psychology could reasonably be expected to learn something of value from participating in an experiment with informed consent. In this case, a good debriefing is central to ethics, because the student ought to learn something about the process by which the psychological knowledge they are studying is produced. There is already a relationship in place between the student and the institution through enrolment, and the teaching and learning process. In this case, ethics as individual protection from harm, and an obligation to provide learning may suffice.

Problems arise, however, when research is taken to the field, and includes participants from more vulnerable and marginalised groups. For example, protection from harm is insufficient as an ethical principle to warrant the participation of homeless men whose health and safety are regularly at risk (King, Hodgetts, Rua & Te Whetu, 2016). The issue of who benefits from research must be addressed (Smith, 1999), as well as issues of reciprocal obligations and/or responsibilities. A narrow version of ethics fails to account for

issues of power and privilege, the historical impacts of colonization and globalisation, and inequalities in economic and sociocultural structures. Such considerations become more important as interactions enter into the context of the relationship between researchers and members of a community.

The purpose of this article is to present ethics and epistemology as complementary first principles for a more complete philosophy of science and practice (see Liu & Liu, 1997). We document an on-going case study where it has been, and hopefully with continue to be helpful; and a second case study that provides an extended account of how we enacted these principles in the past, with historical (arte)facts.

The need for a complementary set of first principles in psychology is made timely by our present situation. For the first time in history, the human species in all its cultural, political and economic diversity is becoming aware of itself as an interconnected whole. The future is going to be fashioned by people with different needs and different value systems increasingly in contact with one another. They might have different assumptions about what ought to happen in the process of being a psychologist, and in doing research in psychology. For it to be of maximum value to humanity, psychological knowledge, production, and practice will benefit from being reflexively shaped through relational lenses, including its most comprehensively ethical lens of global consciousness.

This is described as an awareness of global interconnectedness, a respect for cultural heterogeneity, and a responsibility towards moral interdependence (Liu & McDonald, 2016). Such consciousness is flexible and can be understood through invoking the concept of ren (仁), translated as human-heartedness: a quality without formal analytic definition that originates in Chinese philosophy (Liu, 2017). It is relationally defined in different situations

to include qualities as love, compassion, respect, and devotion (Liu, 2014). As we move out of psychology in the laboratory as a controlled transaction between the researcher and human subjects, and into a more fully inter-connected world of actions and consequences, the qualities of human-heartedness can be shown to be beneficial to the researcher and the communities s/he is working with. The process of taking action in an ethical manner through relationships created in the process of doing psychology, and in the process of producing suitable knowledge is central to our conception of psychology as human science (Dilthey, 1883/1988).

Taking up a position of global consciousness as researchers will mean a shift from seeing ethics as procedural, to ethics as appropriately (i.e. situationally) relational (see Liu & McDonald, 2016, p 321), and aspirational (Liu, 2017, p. 146). Relational ethics “requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and to take responsibility for actions and their consequences” (Ellis, 2007, p.3). Such relational ethics is compatible with the Aristotelian concept of Phronesis, the sense of practical wisdom reliant on understandings of what is good, and how best to act ethically and with integrity (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Phronesis can be understood as a “philosophy of engagement” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 286) that cultivates practices of relational ethics based on reciprocal respect, dignity, and connectedness within the research relationship, and in the communities that research takes place in (Ellis, 2007; Lincoln, 1995). These ethics are ways of engaging with knowledge production that comes about through collaborative relationships negotiated in different social, and cultural contexts (Liu & McDonald, 2016), that may change at different points in time as new things emerge (Frank, 2004; Ellis, 2007). Phronesis and human-heartedness represent the deep wisdom of philosophical masters from vastly different places, coming together today as global consciousness.

Valuing relational ethics as a first principle alongside epistemology in research means that *how* knowledge is produced and how it is acted on, is complementary in importance and augments *what* knowledge is produced. As Ellis (2007) argues we should “hold relational concerns as high as research [concerns] and ... strive to leave the communities, participants, and [ourselves] better off at the end of the research than they were at the beginning,” (p. 25). A phronetic approach to research is centred on addressing issues that matter to both local and global communities, and doing research in ways that are meaningful, and (where relevant) produces desirable change (Flyvbjerg, 2004).

### ***The Philosophical Basis for Complementary First Principles***

Modern science-based psychology originated in Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when physics and chemistry were the darlings of scientific societies. This origin at a time when natural sciences were in the process of discovering laws for fundamental aspects of the universe has led psychology into a history of physics envy: it has regularly adopted a reductionist philosophy of science insufficient for its own discipline (Liu & Liu, 1997). From the logical positivism of the behaviourists, to the mechanistic reductionism of Descartes and of empiricists still widely accepted today, psychology’s dominant philosophy of science is generally unable to encompass culture, cultural belief systems, and societal change, those things created by intentional human action with unanticipated consequences that subsequently form the ground for any inferences about micro-causality.

Because anything done by a person is influenced by so many moving parts (like bits and pieces of culture or technology), it is indeterminate according to any one cause or number of causes. Psychology after a century+ is far from discovering anything that approaches the status of natural law. To deal with the complexity of its subject matter,



psychology has become a method-bound discipline, with strict rules about how to make valid inferences. However, despite this sophistication in quantitative and experimental methods, psychology has found its Holy Grail of discovering natural laws for human behaviour to be perpetually out of reach. Rather than modify its philosophy, and its philosophy of science, it regularly turns to NEW methods, and methodology as a panacea for its philosophical inadequacies (for its latest crisis, reproducibility, see Shrout & Rodgers, 2018; for a case history of these crises, see Cartwright, 1979, and Liu & Liu, 1997).

By using reductionist methods and methodology, and decomposing its subject into variables, psychologists have produced a large body of empirical findings across a wide range of human settings. These legitimately constitute scientific observations of many phenomena of interest. Present-day psychology is a catalogue of tendencies, of probabilities that variables influence one another, moderated by circumstances and mediated by intervening psychological or sociological processes. It has not been able to integrate these tendencies into comprehensive causal theories. Rather, the field is structured by overarching tendencies such as: 1) broad bandwidth theories (e.g. personality theories, like the Big Five), tend to have small predictive utility across a range of settings (e.g., correlations of about 0.3, explaining less than 10% of the variance in any dependent variable); 2) myriad micro-theories have predictive utility or explanatory power in small domains of utility, and 3) even the best of these are circumscribed by culture and class: that is, psychology works best on the populations from which it was derived, that is, on white, educated people from industrialized rich democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010).

Psychology does not have causal formulae or procedures for success, but rather offers advice on how to improve chances for success (or avoiding failure) in a given context.

Psychology is therefore primarily useful as a body of knowledge that can *assist* a person or group to figure out how to improve their chances to accomplish an objective in a given situation. Because the most basic rule of psychology as a body of knowledge is “it depends”, it is most helpful when communicated in a contingent manner, through an on-going dialogue with practitioners or policy makers (Tebes, Thai, & Matlin, 2014).

Unlike other critics of the mainstream, we do not see these over-arching tendencies of the field as the basis of either contentment or dismay. These tendencies are what is to be expected from a contemporary philosophy of science like Roy Bhaskar’s (2008) critical realism: this does not expect 1-1 mappings of cause-to-effect in the domain of human science. Bhaskar’s theory of a stratified ontology involves three layers of reality “out there”: the observed reality (of phenomena, for example, observations generated by an experiment); an intermediate layer of the actual (the conditions of reality operant for a given society at a particular historical moment, including institutional forms and cultural tendencies, that influence surface observations); and a layer of generative mechanisms, or “powers”, deeper than the manifest layers of the actual and phenomenal that are truly causal.

We as social scientists should not expect to be able to move from observations of phenomena to their causes in a facile manner. These only come into view *momentarily* through the layer of the actual. According to critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008), the experiment is not operating in a closed system that isolates cause-to-effect relations. Its outcomes can only be realized through the operation of the layer of the actual, including mediation or moderation from those features of culture and society forming the institutional and ideological ground that participants within and authors of the experiment act upon (Buch-

Hansen, 2005). This doesn't invalidate the experiment as a method, but it does put it into a context where results need to be interpreted next to other kinds of observations, and the theories that inform them. Otherwise, there will be epistemic violence (Teo, 2010), and/or egregious errors of observation and interpretation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), especially if the experiment is an import (Enriquez, 1992).

The advantage of critical realism as a philosophy of science is that it does not reinscribe the Cartesian dualism that characterizes the epistemological conflict between mainstream philosophy of (natural) science and social constructionism. Critical realism accepts that reality is ontologically "out there" but refuses to accept a simple approach to theorizing about "causal" relations observed in that reality. And, it refuses to accept that all observations of this reality are equally subjective (or biased in the same way). This philosophy can be of utility in bridge-building across domains that constructionist philosophies can add little value to (like evolutionary science).

For example, breakthrough theorizing on gene-culture co-evolution by Richerson et al. (2016) summarizes growing evidence that the human propensity for cooperation cannot be explained without invoking group-based (as well as individual-level) selection (see also, Choi & Bowles, 2007). Hence, even human genetics, the current "ultimate cause" of human psychology, is likely to have been historically contingent on selection based on group-level factors, most importantly institutions and their normative features that produce cooperation between self-interested individuals. There might be a "selfish gene", but human collectives have evolved to manage these tendencies through collective action that is contingent on effective communications and adaptive social norms (Ostrom, 1998). This is the latest nail in the coffin for Cartesian reductionism, a search for the atomistic causes of

human behaviour. Any feature of a person's psychology impacting on his/her tendencies for cooperation with others will likely be expressed in a manner dependent on the institutional norms in place for the group(s) or culture that he or she has been socialized into (see Heinrich et al., 2010 for examples). Thus, according to a leading edge of evolutionary science, the social dilemma of cooperation cannot be solved without the normative influence of groups and culture (Richerson et al. 2016). This could be viewed as part of the layer of the actual in critical realism.

This type of evolutionary science supports the structural side of non-reductionist philosophies of science like Bhaskar's (2008). It is the epistemological complement to moral philosophy, as articulated by Aristotle, Confucius, or Kant. We argue that moral philosophy is required as a complement to epistemology for theorists like Bhaskar (2008) to realize the "critical" in critical realism. According to Bhaskar, individuals have agency, an agency that is realized in a possibility space created/constrained by social structures (e.g. cultural institutions and institutional norms). He argued that "the role of agency is to reproduce or transform structures" (p. 62, Buch-Hansen, 2005). Thus, there is no commitment to the determinism that plagued early enlightenment philosophers like Descartes, and continues to trouble mainstream psychology today<sup>1</sup>. Instead, there is the understanding that people have agency to either go with the flow, be predicted by the dominant variables structuring their lives, or they can resist, and attempt to transform these structures. If they succeed, like a Gandhi or a Newton, their actions can in time transform the layer of the actual, that will impact on future observations of behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> which almost never contains any discussion of free will, and has dissected the person into variables or magnetic resonance brain images

Moral philosophy in a system like Bhaskar's unfolds in time, and through intentionality. One can observe social structures at a moment in time, document human agency at a following moment in time attempting to change these structures, and then the consequences of the success or failure of these efforts on individuals, groups, and the cultural system after that (see Archer, 1995, 1996). We are academics inhabiting social systems in which the dominant form of ethics is structured by a culture of individualism and institutions associated with the medical profession. Reflexively, the remainder of this paper can be read as an attempt to envision and describe how to transform these structures into something more suitable for human-hearted science-practitioners, and in tune with a philosophy of critical realism.

We begin by referencing Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy in order to avoid the trap of Cartesian dualism that implicitly permeates psychology today. Liu (2017) writes:

“According to Kant, our experience of anything, from causal behaviour to logical properties, is conditioned by the limitations of our biology, and this precludes pure reason from being able to provide a metaphysics that does not end in antinomies (e.g., contradictions). Similar conditions limit any system of morals or code of ethics. Kant's solution is to argue for the importance of practical reason – the use of reason to derive regulative principles that can be applied to daily lives. What is required for ethics is to develop postulates about ultimate reality. These cannot be proven according to scientific standards of falsification, but nevertheless provide practical reasons for believing in ethical and moral orders.” (p. 141)

Moral philosophy reflects a system of values, and value has an ontological status that cannot be reduced to empirical observations, emotive responses or subjective preferences (Tillich, 1951). Values describe worldviews and justify a system of ethics. Ethics cannot be derived from epistemology. They are not true or false, they reflect a moral order rooted in values (hearkening back to phronesis). In totality, they are also an important

aspect of the layer of the actual in human societies. Although Kant was not able to see this, it is obvious today that the practical postulates he proposed are based on a Christian moral order (belief in free will, in the existence of God, and in the immortality of the soul) rather than one that is universal. The current system of ethics for research is similarly rooted in a Western world view and moral order, but where individualism and a commitment to universal human rights (Inglehart & Baker, 2000) have altered the practical postulates dominant in Kant's day (when a Christian world view was dominant).

The philosophical stance adopted in this essay might be considered as something new to many readers. It derives from an East Asian worldview, whose cosmology is rooted in the dialectic relationship between two fundamentally different, but complementary universal principles (yin-yang, see Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Liu & Liu, 1997; Liu, 2017). This is a fundamentally different worldview compared to the unidirectional causality associated with believing in One God as the maker of Creation. According to Ji, Lee, and Guo (2010), "it is the dynamics among the elements, rather than the elements themselves, that serve as the primary units of analysis" (p. 156). This holistic cosmology is coupled with two further practical postulates of particular relevance for the ethical stance articulated here. In East Asian society, human thought, emotion, and behaviour are regarded as the products of relationships (Ho et al., 2001; Hwang, 1987), rather than being the outputs of a sovereign individual (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In relationalism, the basic unit of society is a pair bond between two persons with reciprocal obligations towards one another (e.g. Father-Son, Ruler-Minister, Husband-Wife, etc.). Morality is realized in relationships, as opposed to being idealized in some universal form (like Kant's categorical imperative, or in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

Finally, in Confucianism, human beings are thought to be endowed with *ren* (仁), or human-heartedness, as a birth right. It is their duty to cultivate this form of relational empathy or compassion over a lifetime. This practical postulate is central as a regulative principle because it simultaneously asserts the original goodness of human nature without providing an analytical definition of how it is to be realized in a given situation. Liu (2017) argues that this lack of a priori definitions that allows it to be flexibly applied in a benevolent manner. His father argued that such a stand facilitates intercultural dialogue (S.H. Liu, 2000).

Returning to understandings of phronesis (the ability to discern how and why to act as a good person), we show how holding relational ethics and epistemology as complementary first principles can be operationalised, and inform practice. Phronesis is not the same as *ren*, but the two are interconnected. Holism is not about homogeneity, but identifying forms of interconnectedness (Liu, 2017). Holding moral interdependence as central means that we neither see the world as socially constructed, nor as universally and objectively understood. Rather, the world is best known through our activity with other people in particular places and times. Placing emphasis on relationships gives focus to the obligations and responsibilities of care within research and practice, requiring us to consider the value and utility of knowledge production. Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that “the goal of phronetic research is to produce input to the ongoing social dialogue and praxis in a society, rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge” (p, 139). Thus, we must consider the function of particular knowledge, how it is acquired, whose purpose it serves, who benefits, and in turn these considerations shape how knowledge is to be produced. A phronetic planning approach in the social sciences is intentional activity grounded on these considerations of function, acquisition, purpose and benefits. Privileging these

considerations in research collaborations ensures that decisions are based on value judgments inherent in relational ethics. They guide selection of methodologies best suited to specific research contexts, as well as adjudicating between considerations of instrumental gain versus those of possibly inflicting epistemological violence.

Case studies can be useful exemplars of relational ethics and epistemology operating as complementary first principles, and of how human-heartedness and phronesis can be theorized about and observed in practice. The case study highlights the complexities of relationships within research processes and produces meaningful context-dependent knowledge that leads to higher levels of learning, gained through experience rather than rule-governed theory (Flyvbjerg, 2006)

*Case Study 1: Creating and Documenting a New Alliance for Countering Violent Extremism*

For our first exemplar we use the case study of a forum consisting of government agencies, civil society, community leaders and us as researchers formed to care for the very small number of individuals under the supervision of the Department of Corrections in New Zealand who are charged with having adopted violent extremist ideologies. The original goals of the group were to develop an approach for these individuals to disengage from violent extremism, provide support for these individuals and their families, as well as to establish a New Zealand body of literature in this area.

**Agenda Setting.** First there must be reason to come together. These reasons are about issues or grievances in society rather than about answering a research question or addressing a hypothesis. Research based on ideas of phronesis, human-heartedness, and community psychology is issue-driven and comes about from a concern to address social concerns (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Perkins, Hughey & Speer, 2002). This group was formed on an



ethics of care to support specific individuals and their families in the Correctional landscape, to work towards broader social cohesion by engaging communities to develop bespoke strategies and processes to counter violent extremism, and to address an absence of a New Zealand-centric knowledge base in this area.

Crucially, the initial impetus for this forum came from the Department of Corrections, which recognized a need for community and academic input to manage a new (but growing) area of potentially harmful action and belief. The people brought together for the first meeting were not closely connected, but were selected because of their positive reputation, either in a relevant community, in academia, or because they were institutional power-holders with a stake in this area. Bringing people deliberately together for this purpose and creating this setting worked to produce “incubators of relationships that yield social capital ... and [in turn] productive networks of institutional relations” (Perkins et al, 2002, p. 46). Some important actions emerging from this process were made possible because of the commitment of the major power-holder in this situation (Department of Corrections) to make changes to its operating procedures as a consequence of communicative input from forum members. In this instance, power can be seen as constructive and productive, exercised as an asset (Flyvbjerg, 2001), which works to cultivate moral interdependence between group members to produce context-dependent knowledge in order to enact positive and informed change. From the perspective of critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008), it is a visible manifestation of the layer of the actual. Government ministries are instrumental in actioning research and in making use of research in many industrialized countries, whereas their operation would not be as influential in non-industrialized societies.

Undertaking 'action research' (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2013), and producing knowledge as a consequence of issues or grievances in society works towards balancing the power relationships inherent in research processes, making provision for justice, and producing outputs that serve the interests of, and increase volume to the voices of the researched. In Case 1, the research founded on relational ethics was heterarchically organised. Heterarchical organisation emphasises interpersonal processes that promote engagement with multiple stakeholders with whom authority is shared, and accountability to one another fashions co-productions (Tebes, Thai, & Matlin, 2014). Such an approach works to avoid epistemological violence (where research is framed and interpreted within the understandings and priorities of the researcher only, and there is little relationship, and therefore little responsibility of care to participants beyond procedural ethics).

Identifying issues or grievances as important created an opportunity for our initial group to come together. This very starting point began with forming relationships rather than seeking to produce knowledge. This formation was intended for members to be of mutual benefit to each other, and where experts in different areas could converge to contribute to wider social good. Coming together for collective action for this common goal meant that we could identify the diversity of members' priorities and needs, even though group cohesion and partnerships were not yet realised. The initial meeting started with a core group representing government agencies, civil agencies, and the academy. At this beginning point, relationships were established, values for the group identified, terms of references scoped, and identification made of who else needed to be at the table. Geographical location, and hosting of future meetings were decided on to maximize participation, and to increase financial accessibility. This meant that members of

government agencies with budgetary support flew to meetings in spaces provided by the University in order to ease reduce costs for community participation.

**Establishing Group Norms.** This relational work involved establishing trust through character and competence, and in demonstrating care and respect. The initial **goal** of the group was **relationship formation** or connecting with each other and moving that connection towards **committed relationships** with a **common purpose** (see Moreland & Levine, 1982). We negotiated the different social and cultural positions of the group members. Regular meetings were held, particular dress codes were implicitly adopted, and inclusive food practices and religious observances were woven into the fabric of the group's being. Adopting heterarchical organisation, there was acknowledgement and respect of the different hierarchies operating. But at the same time, attempts were made to dismantle destructive, and traditional hierarchies about who can produce knowledge and inform action. This dismantling was attempted through valuing the different forms of expertise in the group, and bringing this varying expertise to prominence at the appropriate points in time. Leadership was shared amongst group members at different stages of research processes. At times, this meant that power normally held by some of the government agencies was put aside, and entrenched systemic practices were able to be negotiated and changed.

For example, the assigning of probation officers who monitor individuals, work with families, and shape rehabilitation is usually routinely done according to human resource availability. Particular community members were able to identify that this could be a damaging process and that consideration needed to be made towards considering factors such as gender, age, religion, class, and ethnicity as important for the supervision

relationship to be effective. Rather than continue to rigidly hold to liberal democratic ideals and entrenched bureaucratic process, Department of Correction's practices were changed so as to maximize the potential for engagement between the individual and their probation officer. As a result, a new probation officer who was the same gender, older and somewhat more culturally appropriate than the previous choice was assigned. In this instance we privileged the function, acquisition, the purpose and benefits of the knowledge that community members offered above the systemic status quo. Relational ethics appropriate for particular people were emphasized here, instead of universal application of a centralized bureaucratic process. Flyvbjerg (2001) reminds us "that is impossible to derive praxis from first principles and theory. Praxis has always been contingent on context-dependent judgement, on situational ethics" (p. 136).

A further example relational ethics driving research and practice was the suggestion of creating more in-depth advice about caring for Muslim prisoners. It was proposed that there needed to be more comprehensive access to halal food and prayer mats as well as greater flexibility around mealtimes, and keeping food in cells during Ramadan. The group also pointed out issues with translation and communication with families, especially in terms of how privacy legislation was enforced, failing to account for communications protocols typical of collectivist cultures. Possibilities for national communication around these issues and provision of staff training opportunities were further suggested. Identification of these and suggested remediations were outside of the original terms of reference for the group (which was primarily around disengagement from extremist violence). However communications in the group were enough to reach a consensus that, for instance, genuinely respecting someone's dietary requirements during the most important festival in their religious calendar was an important way to show respect for

prisoners, hopefully building trust and higher levels of engagement with both the individual and their families within Correction's systems.

Taking a phronetic and relational stance, by focusing on practical activity and knowledge in everyday situations and reflecting on values and interests, leads to a pragmatic and situationally-dependent orientation to action (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Hwang, 1987). This orientation to action has interdependent outcomes whereby the change in one aspect of the system (assigning of probation officers) creates impetus to produce wider change in the same system that could be seen as a preventative measure against future potential violent extremism, through developing more trusting and engaged relationships between prisoners, their families and the Department of Corrections. They illustrate agency as a crucial aspect of critical realism's analysis of systems change (Buch-Hansen, 2005); and shows that actions consequent from research are not necessarily a product or consequence of research outputs, but are produced from the very process by which the research was eventually agreed on.

***Documenting Our Experiences as an Expression of Group Values.*** Therefore, knowledge production and action can be seen to co-exist through valuing expertise, and using knowledge that is produced by the whole group to make changes. Making change or actioning the knowledge was a testament to the interconnectedness of the group, and mutual commitment to the goals of the group. As researchers we became chroniclers of knowledge production. Marie Jahoda discusses this in terms of making the invisible-visible (Fryer, 1986). Through minute-taking, and reviewing case studies we noted that the knowledge exchanges that occurred within our regular meetings were changing actual practices, and that this was a fluent and ongoing process. Such changes happened both

within group meetings, and outside of them, through us gathering together and communicating. By staying close to each other and the experiential data we were recording, we were able to capture important insights, solve unplanned issues and develop inquiry. Relationships between different members were drawn upon to provide expertise and assistance in particular circumstances, and at times in other spheres overlapping with the mandate of our group.

For example, one community member presented to high ranking security professionals and government officials in a private forum, while another was part of a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade delegation to an international conference on regional terrorism. As a group we decided what the academic research direction should be. We looked at what benefits we wanted to achieve with the research, and what value it would have to the communities (both civil and government) we were engaged with. This forced an interrogation of what function our knowledge production would serve, and epistemological considerations of how it would be designed and managed, who would collect the data, and how the analysis should be undertaken. For us, the epistemological framing of our research was simultaneously one of relational ethics. Formal research practices were at times managed from the group, through the academy, into communities, and then fed back to the group.

***Building Social Capital.*** Each member of a group holds both their own reputation and that of the collective, bringing into practice reputation as social capital (Yamagishi, Jin, & Kiyonari, 1999). Actions within and outside of the group reflected both on individuals and on us as a collective. The relationships we had established not only allowed us access to previously unreachable participants, but stimulated knowledge production wherein the

benefit to us as academics was secondary. Rather than producing knowledge to bolster our reputations and employing a hypothetico-deductive model suited to the publication structures of our discipline, we invested ourselves into a research process that laid social capital as its foundation (see Putnam, 2000). The social capital built from the interconnectedness within this group was also able to buffer oversights or mistakes that threatened reputational damage both for individuals and the group. Drawing on this social capital to counter threats to reputation further meant that we were able to review our goals and aspirations, and check to ensure we were still operating within a framework of moral interdependence and justice. Prizing this social capital further meant that epistemological interpretations of the data were shaped by moral obligations to enact a responsibility of care for not only participants who had been entrusted to us but also the members of the group whose reputations were also at stake. Teo (2010) reminds us that we should always be mindful of the 'context of discovery' and to "... look at the underlying cultural, political, economic and personal interest [to] identify the social origins of hypotheses and theories" (p. 300). By holding relational ethics as important as epistemological considerations we were able to shape the productions of knowledge that navigated the context of discovery thoughtfully.

***Reflexive Growth*** is fundamental for social science research and practice and the relationships and the knowledge they produce is within an organic system versus an analytical system. It is at the center of the educational project of lifelong growth to cultivate human-heartedness (Liu, 2014). Growth is reflexive and comes from nurture, guidance, development, obligations, compassion, openness, mentoring, and capacity building that all members of the group brought to the table. There is a flexible responsiveness to change and reflexivity around the relationships, and directions of the group. We found that there were

central figures in the group, but as organisational roles and personal circumstances changed, and when people left and new people were added, there was both continuity and change. As new situations emerged we were able to draw upon the trust, reciprocity, sincerity and common purpose that we had built up as part of group history.

*Case study 2: Academic Organization Building and Relational Ethics*

The phenomenon documented in the above case study, where some fairly significant actions took place as a consequence of communications and planning for research, not as the outcome of research results (e.g. a publication) might not be an isolated phenomenon. Decisions and actions impacting on the well-being of people may happen regularly as part of the process of doing research and presenting it. But we as researchers may not be attuned to documenting these instances because we are socialized into an analytical philosophy of science where the expected causal chain is to produce a research report, and then have that research report impact on policy or action. Our first case study was also of a less common “insider account” (Humphey, 2007) of cross-sectoral collaboration, involving transdisciplinary group formation processes that many readers might not be able to see in their everyday lives.

Therefore, we provide a second account of how the process of doing research provided concrete outcomes as a consequence of social capital and relationship building in a more typical academic situation. Through retrospective analysis, from an “insider-outsider” perspective (Humphrey, 2007), we add to our initial account of how a fuller philosophy and philosophy of science could help academic psychologists develop as practitioners of human science, in this case through the more typical output of publications, and the less commonly articulated virtue of character building (*ren*).



To augment understanding of this account, we need the interpellation of hierarchical relationalism (Liu, 2015), part of the cultural belief system of East Asia and other collectivist societies (like Indonesia). This complements the heterarchical heuristic of Tebes, Thai, and Matlin (2014) discussed previously. Liu (2015) describes East Asian societies as “containers of cultural capital consisting of a special moral and ethical form of high power distance collectivism” (p. 84); this involves reciprocal and ethically inscribed, but unequal relationships between high and low powered individuals in stable social relations. This is an aspect of the layer of the actual for the majority world (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010; Hofstede, 2001), contrasting with the value system of freedom and equality implicit in Tebes et al.’s (2014) formulation on the layer of the actual in the United States.

***An Academic Agenda Leading to Relationship Building.*** Unlike in our first case study, the initial phase of relationship building was not driven by an institutional agenda. It was just the every-day occurrence of two colleagues connecting at a conference: Dr. Hamdi Muluk of the University of Indonesia invited Dr. James Liu to visit his home in Jakarta in 2002, following a brief but rich encounter at the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology’s 16<sup>th</sup> International Congress in Yogyakarta. Liu was gifted with the experience of hearing gentle prayers to Allah five times a day in a peaceful household, including in pre-dawn hours. It opened up for him a vista for global consciousness, connecting him to people whose daily lives were permeated by ritual expressions of religious devotion for the first time.

The social capital formed through this meeting could be regarded as a fairly normal consequence of activity in the social roles of teacher and researcher. But going beyond this more deeply into implications, Liu and King (in press) describe it as “relational serendipity”-

a chance encounter between two individuals of like-mind and good intentions, who have the agency and good fortune/fate<sup>2</sup> to grasp opportunities that unfold before them, to collaborate in work that expands to encompass a wider network of relationships that lead, in time, to institutional change.

Years after their first meeting, Liu as Editor-in-chief of the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology (AJSP)* noted that the literature on Islamist terrorism had very few authors from Muslim countries. As he knew that Muluk had become one of the leading psychological researchers on this topic in Indonesia, he asked Muluk to organize his compatriots for a Special Forum on Terrorism in Indonesia for the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* (see Liu & Woodward, 2013; Muluk, Sugmatoyo, & Ruth, 2013; Milla, Faturochman & Ancok, 2013; Putra & Sukabdi, 2013). The qualities of human-heartedness required in this instance were effort and sincerity on both sides (being dutiful in exerting maximum effort is central to *ren* at work, whereas harbouring good intentions is central to all human-hearted endeavour). In terms of hierarchical ethical obligations: patience (a form of benevolence) was especially incumbent on the higher-powered role of the editor, and perseverance (a form of loyalty and respect) especially on the part of the submitting authors (see Liu, 2014, 2015). These are stable, role-based relational ethics, sharply differentiated by power, with none of the give-and-take and shifting of role responsibilities we described previously (as heterarchical). When running workshops for Special Issues in Asia, Liu is careful to warn submitting authors that while he may exercise benevolence in mentoring authors towards publication, there

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<sup>2</sup> Fortune/fate has cosmological implications in Chinese (Buddhist) culture, as inscribed in the concepts of Yuan (缘) and Yuan Fen (缘分)

are procedure rules that have the ethical status of law. If both (or all) blind reviewers recommend reject, the article is rejected, period.

At the time, very few social psychologists from Indonesia were publishing in international journals, and the successful completion of this special issue enhanced the academic reputation of these authors. Reputation, as theorized by Yamagishi and Matsuda (2002), is a tradeable asset: everyone involved in this enterprise benefitted; notably in terms of career advancement for the Indonesians. One publication in this special issue contained interviews from the notorious Bali bombers (Milla, Faturochman & Ancok, 2013) providing benefit to a wider international community of scholars, who would not otherwise have had access to this research. These authors were located at the University of Gadjah Mada (UGM), which together with the University of Indonesia in Jakarta are the two most prestigious institutions for doing psychology in Indonesia. Coincidentally, the inaugural Editor-in-Chief of *AJSP*, and past-President of the Asian Association of Social Psychology South Korean Uichol Kim was simultaneously working in Southeast Asia to establish the Asian Association of Indigenous and Cultural Psychology (AAICP, with a base at UGM). This synchronicity of influence from two high-powered East Asian academics specializing in culture encouraged many Indonesians to join the Asian Association of Social Psychology (AASP) where Kim and Liu are active (being past Presidents, and former editors-in-chief of its flagship journal). This has in turn shaped Indonesian social psychology in a direction it might not otherwise have taken. The operation of face and favour has been theorized in a classic paper by Hwang (1987), and this retrospective account may be interpellated through the lens of hierarchical relationalism, where interpersonal relationships of higher and lower powered people spread their influence to wider circles (just as in classical Confucian theory, especially as articulated by Mencius).

**Academic Consequences of Reputation.** Through the continuing efforts of Muluk and Dr. Mirra Noor Milla, who continue to maintain high profiles in this area, social psychologists were invited to develop counter-terrorism research involving convicted terrorists by the Department of Corrections in Indonesia. This has helped to strengthen links between social psychologists, practitioners, and institutional authorities in an area of importance for the societal well-being of Indonesia. Mirra Milla is particularly effective at connecting people on the ground: her qualities of humility, kindness, and steadfastness are such that one of the jailors of Ali Imron (in jail for life for his role in the Bali bombings) thought she was his wife. This was because she brought food to him when she was doing interviews. Such forms of human-hearted interconnectedness are central to research coming out of this program. But it has been difficult for team members, relatively untrained in qualitative methods<sup>3</sup> to fully articulate the stories embedded in Milla's qualitative data.

A junior member of Muluk's team has had an internship with Arie Kruglanski's team at University of Maryland. Kruglanski (2013), a world-leading social psychology researcher on countering violent extremism, commented on the Indonesian special issue, opening the door for this connection. A second special issue of the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, this time on countering violent extremism, included a new generation of young researchers from Indonesia (see Hakim & Mujahidah, 2020; Milla, Hudiyan, & Arifin, 2020; Muluk, Umam, & Milla, 2020; Yustisia, Shadiqi, Milla, & Muluk, 2020). The widening of this circle should not be considered as unusual. It is putting into writing a description of reputational consequences following from an agentic and reflexive approach to doing social science research. Muluk's status today, as a full Professor of Psychology with considerable

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<sup>3</sup> Most Asian psychology programs privilege quantitative methods over qualitative methods, and like their counterparts in North America and Europe, offer little to no training in philosophy or philosophy of science

publications at the most prestigious university in Indonesia, gives him considerable social capital and agency in a society that values rank. The actual impact of his and other people's efforts in on-going efforts at counter-terrorism will depend on the quality and character of the research done, and the quality and calibre of the relationships between social scientists, NGOs, and officials in Indonesia.

***An Academic Agenda Leading to Relationship Building and Organizational***

**Outcomes.** When Liu and Muluk met in 2002, there were less than a handful of Indonesians in AASP: now there are more than 50 active members, and almost 100 in total. When the Indonesians hosted AASP's 10<sup>th</sup> biennial conference at UGM in Yogyakarta in 2013, it attracted around 1000 academics. Currently, there are plans afoot to formalize the relationship between AASP and Indonesian Association of Social Psychology. The respectful, trusting, and mutually supportive relationships between James Liu, Hamdi Muluk, Mirra Noor Milla, Faturochman, and Moh Abdul Hakim cannot be said to have been causal (there are many other influences on any significant action/s including Uichol Kim's efforts), but they contributed to the organizational outcome that Indonesia has become an important member community of the Asian Association of Social Psychology. Through AASP and AAICP conferences, the Indonesians now regularly meet with their neighbors in Malaysia and the Philippines. These are all places where a more culturally informed social psychology has a chance to thrive.

Indonesian social psychology is active and vital. The Javanese, as inheritors of an old sophisticated culture, have perhaps a culturally inscribed interest in culture and psychology; but over the course of many visits from Liu and from Kim (e.g. keynote addresses, workshops, seminars, etc.), the Indonesian Association of Social Psychology has become

increasingly invested in indigenous psychology, and in developing psychology as a human science. These are particular choices from a field of probability, where a specific phenomenon could be seen to emerge contingent from a larger field of possibilities (see Liu, Fisher-Onar, & Woodward, 2014, for a general theory of societal change drawing on critical realism). The Indonesian Association of Social Psychology published a social psychology textbook in Bahasa Indonesian, written by and for Indonesians, for the first time in 2018 (Pitaloka, Abidin, & Milla, 2018). Previously, everyone used North American texts (in English) for teaching undergraduate social psychology, a rather poor choice in a country where young people struggle with English. This textbook not only introduces mainstream ideas, but also illustrates these with local applications and examples, in an attempt to stimulate a more critical and lived understanding of social psychology for its readers. The impact of this textbook will again depend on its quality, and the quality of teaching, learning, scholarship and application it stimulates among Indonesian undergraduates. It would be hard to say what “caused” the making of the text, but it would be safe to say that the relationship between Indonesian social psychologists and AASP was inspirational for the process. In Bhaskar’s (2008) terms, this textbook is a result of activity emerging as phenomena, out of the layer of the actual, that will be responsible for influencing future observations. Whether this textbook results in a social psychology that is more relationally engaged, more culturally embedded, and of more practical value to Indonesians will, as always, be indeterminate, and realized in time by myriad acts of collective and individual human agency.

### **Conclusion**

Our two first-hand accounts illustrate important points about ethics as a first principle of research. First, we can point to the importance of providing first-hand

narratives of how being accountable to relationships. These act as testaments to how an ethically interconnected research process, following rules of human-heartedness and phronesis can contribute to societal well-being. In the first case, communications led to actions affecting the well-being of Muslim prisoners in a New Zealand corrections system. We were able to provide a first-hand (insider) account of these outcomes because we were involved in cross-sectoral collaboration, driven by an agenda set by the government institution in charge of managing these outcomes. Through the previous sentence, we illustrate how an heterarchical heuristic (Tebes et al., 2014) and hierarchical relationalism (Liu, 2015) can act in concert.

In the second case, where there were primarily academics involved, we could provide a first-hand account for academic outcomes only, because we were insider-outsiders to Indonesia. Whether these research processes impacted benevolently on the rehabilitation and well-being of prisoners incarcerated for terrorism in the Indonesia, or has resulted in a more culturally-oriented psychology curriculum, would require a different set of authors for testimonial.

In both cases, the agendas for action were set by power-holders, by Departments of Corrections in both countries, and by the Indonesian Association of Social Psychology in the second case. Concrete outcomes can be narrated as influenced to a significant degree by relationships formed in the process of doing research, relationships that can change institutional rules or produce representational objects that become part of the “layer of the actual” (Bhaskar, 2008). These objects may then be empowered to enable (rather than cause) future consequences.

In both cases, there was commitment to human-heartedness (including respect for culture and indispensable cultural differences, Liu et al., 2020), that was globally conscious (Liu & McDonald, 2016) and involved phronesis (Flyvbjerg, 2004). In both cases, human-heartedness also meant that we liked each other and liked working together. We were able to actualise this human-heartedness, the capacity for good held by each of us through exercising phronesis; acting as a well-intentioned person in research and practice. In both of case studies, there were power imbalances. In the Corrections case, the Department were the sole actors with the power to determine institutional rules for prisoners; community members could only affect the well-being of prisoners through the provision of advice and social support. In the academic case, Liu had the power to accept, reject, or demand revision of academic articles submitted, and the Indonesians were the ones who had the power to change behaviour for members of their academic association. Narrating these power imbalances as part of relationship formation can be read as not only cultivating human heartedness (i.e. character building), they are also part of forming ethically inscribed networks for a more overtly self-consciousness global society.

We circulated this paper to both the New Zealand and Indonesian groups we were involved with, and amended our work in accord with their comments. Indonesian scholar Mirra Noor Milla commented "James Liu's endeavour has continuously helped potential young scholars with limited experience in several important research topics. This trust-based relationship has facilitated collaborations, shared valuable knowledge, and widened access for the under-represented population. Subsequently, the connection has boosted researchers' self-efficacy for future research and development. Without these relations, without the trust-based network whom James has built, this kind of success story will never happen".



If academic researchers in the developed world became more regularly committed to supporting the development of a psychology attuned to the well-being and habitus of their colleagues in the developing world, it becomes more possible for psychology to make a difference. If academic researchers were more regularly committed to working with government agencies and community members to provide a forum for communication and support in areas of mutual interest, bureaucratic practices that negatively impact on a society's minorities could be quickly identified and remedied. We think that it would be healthy if more members of the discipline of psychology regularly and reflexively provided first-hand accounts such as these. A philosophy of relational ethics shows how we can make a difference in our everyday lives as academics and as human beings, and encourages us to take agency where we stand, instead of just criticizing inadequacies of the mainstream. In acting as human agents for change, we help to bring the critical in critical realism to life.

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