

# Questioning the Unquestionability of the Expert's Perspective in Psychology

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Sayyed Mohsen Fatemi<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Psychology's infatuation with precision, objectivity, universality, refutability, and verifiability brought about a focus on the legitimacy of the perspective of the knower namely the expert who, at the center of discourse of power, could collect and analyze the data and then embark on generalizing the information for the sake of generative theories. The article argues that mainstream psychology has mainly acted from the perspective of the observer and not perspective of the actor and this has largely silenced the reality of the actor. While focusing on the underlying components of the perspective of the expert, the article calls for questioning the unquestionability of the perspective of the observer and indicates how the process of questioning may help us understand the often concealed-to-oblivion dimensions of the actors.

## Keywords

positivist psychology, perspective, observer, actor, knowing, psychology

## Introduction

Critics have argued for a long time that psychology has an infatuation with precision, objectivity, universality, refutability and verifiability (Guba &

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<sup>1</sup>Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Sayyed Mohsen Fatemi, Department of Psychology, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, William James Hall 232, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

Email: smfatemi@hotmail.com; smfatemi@wjh.harvard.edu

Lincoln, 1994; Holzkamp, 1991; Teo, 2005; Tolman, 1994). I argue that this situation has brought about a focus on the legitimacy of the perspective of the knower, namely the expert who, at the center of discourse of power, could collect and analyze the data and then embark on generalizing the information for the sake of generative theories. Psychologists with a critical approach have demonstrated that discourse of power within the logical positivist psychology defined, regulated, and prescribed the legitimacy, privilege, and the control of the expert. The expert was the one who could know the reality, who had access to the truth and who could see the truth of the truth (see Code, 1995; Danziger, 1990; Hare & Secord, 1972; Teo, 2005; Tolman, 1994). In this article, I call into question the supposed expert's perspective in psychology, and argue that the mindlessness of the mainstream psychology in its dependence upon the expert's perspective needs to be revisited.

In discussing the role of the expert's perspective in psychology, Walsh-Bowers (2005) notes that

North American psychologists' habitual adherence to a research relationship of expert investigator and ignorant "subject" had a marked impact after World War II on the rapidly expanding field of clinical psychology and ultimately on community psychology. When they adopted the "scientist-practitioner model" in 1949, clinical psychologists hoped to establish the scientific legitimacy of their profession for which identification with the hierarchical laboratory model of experimentation seemed essential. (pp. 100-101)

Logical positivism maintained that there was always a distance between the researcher (the knower, the observer, or the expert) and the reality of the research object (see, Herda, 1999). Logical positivism underlined the significance of exploring universal laws for knowledge. The scientist/the expert who could move in line with these universal laws had the privilege of producing scientific discourse (Bronowski, 1956; Holton, 1993; Whaley & Surratt, 1967). The positivist-oriented expert in psychology was, in the eyes of logical positivist psychology, an objective and value-free observer, who could know the reality without bias. For the positivist, the truth manifested itself in an observable and external reality, which could be discovered through universal laws (see Bronowski, 1956; Feigl, 1969; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Holton, 1993). The notion of the positivist knowledge, its universality, and its quintessential truth has been challenged by philosophers, scientific theorists, and critical psychologists (see Danziger, 1990; Delby, 1996; Kuhn, 1970; Landesman, 1997; Popper, 1959; Teo, 2005; Tolman, 1994; Ziman, 1991).

Bryant (1985) makes a distinction among three types of positivism: the French tradition ranging from Saint-Simon to Durkheim, developments in

German and Austrian social theory and research before 1933 and after 1945, and American empirical research from 1930s to the present. Bryant (1985) indicates that the empirical research in the United States is characterized by an engagement in the refinement of statistical techniques and research instruments. In addition, the focus is placed on the expert as the observer of the research and the possibility of implementing a value-free and objective research (see Bronowski, 1956; Feigl, 1969; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Holton, 1993).

Discussing the empirically based psychology, Winston (2001) indicates how psychology denied any metaphysical search for understanding and considered itself an exact science similar to physics. Describing the technological driven psychology and its concentration on obtaining laws similar to the laws of physics, Winston (2001) pinpoints that “by the early 1900s, educational researchers in Germany, England, and the United States took up the search for the most effective educational techniques through experimental manipulation of classroom conditions” (p. 124).

Slife and Gnatt (1999) present the underlying components of psychological research that contend to move in line with the natural science and demonstrate how the psychotherapy and psychology’s focus on numbers, operationalization, measurement, and quantification would block the avenues of research in exploring possible meaningful perspectives and impose acting from a single perspective. In elucidating this, Slife and Gnatt (1999) reiterate that “We submit that this obvious lack of knowledge seriously impedes our ability to gain accurate and meaningful access to a great many phenomena of psychological and clinical interest” (p.1455).

In describing the role and the implications of logical positivist psychology and its approach toward the subject of research, Danziger (1990) explicates that

The received view is based on a model of science that is reminiscent of the tale of Sleeping Beauty. The objects with which psychological science deals are all present in nature fully formed, and all the prince-investigator has to do is to find them and awaken them with the magic kiss of his research. . . . In the past the effects of a naive empiricism may have assigned an essentially passive role to investigators, as though they merely had to observe or register what went on outside them. (p. 2)

## **Expert’s Perspective in Psychology (the Perspective of the Observer)**

In line with the critique on positivist science by Horkheimer (1937/1992) and on psychology by Danziger (1990) and Teo (2005), I argue that it was on the

strength of the perspective of the observer or the expert in psychology that the subjects of research or the participants could come to realize the unknown parts of their self or could have their characteristics identified, analyzed, and understood. It was the expert who determined the levels and contents of knowing.

I even argue that the expert follows a monological path based on his or her position of knowing: The excavation of deeper meanings often take place by the expert whereas the person who produces the talk (the actor) is almost always unaware of his or her reality unless they are exposed to the privilege of the interpretation by the so-called psychoanalyst (see Jaspers, 1997).

In proceeding with my arguments, I want to underline that the scientific model of knowing in mainstream psychology is tied to the notion of prediction and control and endorses the legitimacy of the expert's perspective over that of the actor. This is the observer that, through using the right methods and tools, cannot only identify the reality of the actor but also the needs of the actor. The actor can come to the reality of his or her problem, wants, motives, and so on through the help of the observer. In a critique on the positivist research, Code (1995) challenges the view since "knowers are detached and neutral spectators, and objects of knowledge are separate from them, inert items in knowledge-gathering processes, yielding knowledge best verified by appeals to observational data" (p. 17).

Focusing on prediction and control as the conspicuous features of positivism and its leading philosophy for research, Herda (1999) pinpoints that

Rationality in the received view of research is often thought of as a logical or linear thought process carried out by a researcher in a position external to the data. The goal is to collect data and put them in a form that represents and controls the world under investigation. The world of the researcher and the world one studies are separate from one another. (p. 132)

The positivist realm of psychology was eagerly looking for discovering the laws that would display how causes and effects would transpire in human interaction and their hierarchical levels. As such, positivist psychological research mainly relied on quantification as a tool to determine the precision and objectivity. Specifically, plausibility and sensibility of causal laws would need to borrow their proof from the provable quantifiable data. Measurement and assessment, therefore, provided the logical positivist-driven psychology with the joy and rigor of substantiation. I would like to pinpoint that this gave rise to the sovereignty of a standard language of psychology from the expert's perspective that could delineate how life inside and outside the laboratory needs to be governed (see Holzkamp, 1991; Tolman, 1994).

In describing this process, Bowers (2005) examines the underlying components of the expert's perspective in psychology and its historic roots and argues that

proponents of scientific rigor successfully imposed standards of decontextualized detachment for the investigative situation, minimizing the interpersonal context of conducting research to establish universal laws of behavior that transcended time, place, and person. (p. 98)

I would like to reiterate that the positivist psychology's claim of universality suggests that scientific psychological knowledge has to be obtained by virtue of a solidified methodology. Therefore, the results obtained would not be considered knowledge, according to the positivist-driven psychology, if it were not acquired and conveyed within the framework of the preestablished legitimate methodology.

According to Teo (2005),

From a critical perspective, one would have to describe an investigative practice that conceptualizes the subject matter by the way the method prescribes it, as *methodologism* (Teo, 1993), a concept similar to the one used by Bakan(1961/1967), *methodolatry* (p. 158), to denote the worship of method. In a similar vein, Toulmin and Leary (1985) referred to the *cult of empiricism* and Danziger (1985) called it the *methodological imperative*. (p. 36)

The positivist viewpoint, I want to argue, excluded any language and discourse which could not be apprehended through the five physical senses. One may track down the roots of positivist-driven psychology in Darwinian evolutionary theory, the privilege of natural sciences' methodology and their implications for formulating the universal truths (see Scruton, 2009). Psychology in its mainstream positivist version, thus, claimed to be a value-free discipline that is in search of the truth through conducting objective research with a focus on measurement. The claim purported that with the rise of the right and the legitimate methodology, one can acquire the true knowledge about individuals regardless of culture, history, and contexts.

Habermas (1968/1972) indicates that positivism monopolizes the realm of knowing and refutes the possibility of any mode of knowing except the ones that are legitimized through positivist science. In challenging positivism, Habermas (1968/1972) indicates that "scientism means science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science" (p. 4).

Furthermore, Habermas (1968/1972) also challenges positivism's claim that through the use of the right method and techniques, one may explore the truth. For example, Habermas (1968/1972) demonstrates how a focus on the positivist and technique-oriented perspective would give rise to technological consciousness, but would be oblivious to other forms of consciousness.

Winston (2001) describes how the sovereignty of establishing a physics like psychology was the leading factor for the experimental psychology, arguing that

. . . Titchener characterized Mach's view as allowing that psychology could become an exact science in the same way as physics. According to Titchener, Mach quoted Quetelet the idea that experiments "yielded varied outcomes because of chance" but that chance is subject to law, and the "intellectual elements of our social life, the psychological processes, are no less uniform than the rest. (p. 130)

The positivist-driven aspiration of changing psychology into physics is still the goal of a number of psychologists who underline the relationship between the scientific truth and the rigorous methodologies. Deep down this assumption is the claim that behavior can be examined and analyzed through the use of the right techniques and methods. The standardized techniques and methodologies would endorse the legitimacy of the observer speaking for the actor. This gives rise to reductionism where intentions and meanings are disengaged from actions and behaviors and language loses its power except the language of the observer who is armed with the techniques and standards (see Herda, 1999).

The expert, in the eyes of the positivist psychology, is the one who has already legitimized their expertise through complying with the privilege of the methodology within natural sciences and implementing value-free empirical research (see Arthur, 1966; Danziger, 1990; Grove, Zald, Lebow, Snitz, & Nelson, 2000; Hammond, Hursch, & Todd, 1964; Holzkamp, 1991; Lanyon, 1972; Teo, 2005; Tolman, 1994).

## **The Legitimacy and Privilege of the Perspective of the Observer**

It has been within the domination of the empirical-analytical psychology that the perspective of the expert has gained its legitimacy. This legitimacy has given rise to the presentation of the experts' views as unquestionable facts with huge practical implications. In delineating the power of the expert-oriented psychology and its practical implications, Latour (2004) notes that

Only in the name of science is Stanley Milgram's experiment possible, to take one of Stengers and Despret's topoi. In any other situation, the students would have punched Milgram in the face . . . thus displaying a very sturdy and widely understood disobedience to authority. That students went along with Milgram's torture does not prove they harboured some built-in tendency to violence, but demonstrates only the capacity of scientists to produce artifacts no other authority can manage to obtain, because they are undetectable. The proof of this is that Milgram died not realizing that his experiment had proven nothing about average American inner tendency to obey—except that they could give the appearance of obeying white coats! Yes, artifacts can be obtained in the name of science, but this is not itself a scientific result, it is a consequence of the way science is handled (see the remarkable case of Glickman, 2000). (p. 222)

### *Broad Social and Cultural Implications*

Danziger (1990) presents a historical account of the relationship between researcher and the subject of research and demonstrates how psychological knowledge including the expert's view is socially and culturally constructed. Danziger (1990) discusses the historical roots of relationship between researcher and the subject of research in Germany, France, and England and highlights how the subject of research was subjected to the socially constructed view of the psychologists as experts. Furthermore, Danziger (1990) demonstrates how the experience of "the subject of research was to be discounted in the dominant model of psychological investigation" (p. 183).

The researcher's voice and its legitimacy in deciding what to do have been a leading factor in endorsing policies, programs, and projects with huge social implications. The proponents of IQ tests abided by Social Darwinism and claimed that the ones with low intelligence were doomed to failure and had to be eradicated. The Darwinian-driven psychology considered its right to condemn those who did not possess the required intelligence (see Albee, 1981; Clark, 1965; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Exemplifying the condemning role of such legitimacy, Albee (1981, as cited in Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005) highlights the statements of a psychologist who acts from the perspective of the observer and leaves no room for the actor. The psychologist's words are as follows:

We face the possibility of racial admixture here that is infinitely worse than that favoured by any European country today, for we are incorporating the Negro into our racial stock, while all of Europe is comparatively free from this taint . . . the decline of American intelligence will be more rapid . . . owing to the presence of the Negro. (Brigham [Princeton psychologist], 1923)

On the implications of the expert's legitimacy in implementing policies, Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz (1978) writes,

Examples of the tendency of experts to use fixed categories when others might be more revealing can be found in many official educational assessments. Take the landmark of Equality of Educational Opportunity report, which found that students' achievement was highly correlated with students' socioeconomic background but apparently uncorrelated with school quality. This report has had an enormous impact of educational policy in the last twenty years. It led many educators to the disturbing conclusion that improving school quality would not increase students' level of achievement. Although this conclusion resulted in positive systemic changes, such as greater racial integration, it also created the unfortunate impression that educators who attempted to make changes in the school apart from changing their socioeconomic makeup were misguided. (p. 127)

Underneath the consecration of the expert's command of the world, there lies the philosophy of logical positivism where the manipulation of the world through the so called scientific methods would give rise to universal laws that would predict the state of affairs. The expert's observation was, as the logical positivism claimed, the key to the truth and truth was explored within the paradigmatic analysis of the perspective of the expert where the reality would be described, explained, controlled, and predicted by the expert (Berg, 2009; Code, 1995). In explicating the expansion of the positivist-driven psychology and its endorsing role for recognizing specific modes of expressiveness and denying and marginalizing other ones, Fine (2002) notes that

For better or worse, the more troubling question for critical feminist researchers, with respect to the presence of an absence, is not actually which methods to apply but questions about our disciplinary reliance on positivism. That is, psychology's obsession with the observable, the model-able, and the connect-able has forced us into very narrow holes about what we can speak about with authority. (p. 19)

I need to emphasize that the expert was given both legitimacy and privilege since it was through the presence of the experts that knowing could *happen*. Knowing, based on the logical positivism's stance in mainstream psychology, needs to be well attuned and geared to techniques. Techniques and tools would serve as windows through which knowing happens. The expert is thus seen as always equipped with technical knowledge and jargons without which the truth of knowing would be imponderable.

Positivist way of knowing was associated with the promotion of the assumption that the available tools and techniques for the expert would be the



protective factor for the subject of research as they were able to endorse the plausibility of research regardless of the political, social, cultural, and local factors which could affect the subject of research (see Bernal, 1939; Hessen, 1971; Nader, 1996).

## **The Sovereignty of the Expert's Perspective and Its Implications**

I submit that the technique-oriented way of living and its hegemony through the expert who possessed knowledge produced practical implications for the subject of research. It also prescribed the use of the right technique for dealing with human issues and problems. The righteousness of the right techniques was considered as the panacea for dealing with the practical aspects of life. Habermas (1975/1973) challenges the logical positivist way of thinking and highlights the price that the modern society has paid for advancing technological consciousness. Habermas suggests that this has led to people's deprivation of reflexive and reflective thinking over their destiny and their divorce from a real contribution in fulfilling a responsible and creative role.

Habermas (1973) reiterates the implications of the modern life at the mercy of techniques and experts and demonstrates how knowing is forcibly contained and entrapped by the flux of techniques when he writes,

Yet even a civilization that has been rendered scientific is not granted dispensation from practical questions: therefore a peculiar danger arises when the process of scientification transgresses the limit of reflection of a rationality confined to technological horizon. For then no attempt at all is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens concerned with the practical control of their destiny. Its place is taken by the attempt to attain technical control over history by perfecting the administration of society, an attempt that is just as impractical as it is unhistorical. (p. 255)

In line with the emphasis on the salient role of the expert in deciding what can be known and how it can be known, the expert's status of privilege and legitimacy ultimately needs to emanate from the sources of power. In critiquing the sources of power within mainstream psychology, Teo (2005) writes,

Psychology has been transformed from a philosophical into a natural scientific discipline on the background of colonialism, slavery, and exploitation. Thus, it is not surprising that important pioneers of psychology assimilated or actively contributed to scientific racism. Paul Broca (1824-1880), who is celebrated in psychology for his location of speech loss (aphasia) in an area of the brain (known as Broca's area), was one of the leaders of scientific racism. He was

convinced that non-European races were inferior in terms of intelligence, vigor and beauty (see Teo, 2004). It is also remarkable that Broca gave up all standards of scientific inquiry when he “handled” research on human “races.” At the beginning were his conclusions, which were followed by data collection and selective reports. Criteria were changed and abandoned when the results did not fit his original conclusions (see Gould, 1996). He embraced “confirming” evidence and repressed disconfirming information. The pioneer of social psychology Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931), who divided, based on psychological criteria, humans into primitive, inferior, average, and superior races, suggested vehemently that races were physiologically and psychologically distinct, that races were different species, and that all members of a race shared an immutable race soul (see Teo, 2004). (pp. 154-157)

I, therefore, stipulate that the search of the main stream psychology for universality and objectivity brought about a selective emphasis on the implementation of scientific methods of inquiry which highlighted that the path to finding the truth needs to be legitimized through the perspective of the expert within mainstream psychology. I argue that having discerned the unquestionability of the legitimacy of the expert’s perspective within the main stream psychology, cross-cultural psychology has tried to apply the same paradigmatic analysis for understanding culture and cultural issues. Citing Laungani’s objection against the unquestionability of mainstream psychology’s perspective of the expert, Teo (2005) indicates that

According to Laungani, neither experimental studies nor psychometric instruments nor taxonomies provide knowledge of mental life’s specificity in other cultures. Laungani even goes so far as to suggest that the experiment may be a “fruitless exercise” (p. 395) in other cultures, because people may not have been socialized into the meaning of psychological experiments. (p. 161)

## **Silencing and Marginalizing the Nonexpert’s Voices**

I underscore that the expert’s perspective within logical positivism marginalizes or ignores the personal meanings that unfold themselves within the subcultures of a culture and merely emphasize the legitimacy of the expert’s perspective. The salience of the role of the expert as the truth finder is associated with both cognitive and emotional impacts in that the subject of research who is exposed to the vociferousness of the voice of the expert may not take it upon himself or herself to voice his or her presence in the meanders of the hegemony of the expert’s control. Sundararajan (2005) elucidates the absence of reflexivity for the expert-stricken subject of research when she indicates that

But to the lay person, who is not in a position to evaluate the empirical findings of the experts, the authority of science can be as inhibiting to critical thinking as the Latin Bible in Medieval times. Indeed, moral maps are more transparent; when people talk about God and values, terms, which are obviously subjective hence, open to question. It is when values are bolstered by scientific facts that they become opaque and impervious to critical reflections. (p. 54)

Feminist researchers have argued that the domineering role of the researcher in psychology has led to the marginalization of the subject of research and ignored the role of power, privilege, voice, equality, and subjectivity in the process of research and its implications for the subject of research (see Fine, 1992; Lather, 1991; Maher, 1999; Reinhartz, 1992).

The marginalization of the subjects of research and their voices has contributed to the creation of imbroglia in addressing the challenges and problems of both groups and individuals in local and international level. The following quote from Sheik Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Lebanese Hezbollah (as cited in Ginges, Atran, Sachdeva, & Medin, 2011) may exemplify the gaps between the array of the seemingly plausible data of the psychological observer as the expert and the reality of the actor:

The problem with the discipline of psychology is that it attempts to study the phenomenon of martyrdom from the perspective of pragmatic vocabulary and laboratory results. They refuse to admit that certain things can be understood only through labor and pain. You can never be capable of appreciating freedom if you do not come to grips with enslavement. You can appreciate the crisis of the starved when you come to grips with the pangs of starvations. (Abu-Rabi, 1996; p. 242)

## **The Position of Knowing and Its Ontological Superiority**

I state that the underlying element of the expert's legitimacy in possessing the truth is ontologically embedded in the position of the knower as a superior hierarchical agent who is privileged in his or her status to access the truth.

Questioning the legitimacy of the perspective of the experts, Spariosu (2004) writes,

Our global pundits, whether on the right or the left, seem to connect human progress primarily with material development. Most worldwide statistics and indicators are economic in nature, measuring human happiness by what an individual or a social group has, rather than by what they are. Thus, we have presently divided the world into "developed," underdeveloped," and

“developing” societies. But if we truly wish to change our global paradigms, then we need to change the focus of our worldwide efforts from social and economic development to human self-development. From the standpoint of the latter, there are no developed or underdeveloped societies, but only developing ones. It is this kind of development that in the end will help us solve our practical problems, including world hunger, poverty, and violence, and will turn the earth into a welcoming and nurturing home for all of its inhabitants, human and nonhuman. (p. 5)

### ***Beyond the Expert’s Diagnosis***

One can see how the expert’s perspective has imposed inhibiting perspectives on a wide variety of issues. The 2003 president of the American Psychological Association, Robert J. Sternberg, reports that as a child he was informed that he had a low IQ. He was also told that as a college student he should not study psychology (Sternberg, 1997). Carl Leggo (1999), the Canadian poet, writer, researcher, and scholar was told that he could never be a writer.

One may see other examples of the expert’s perspective on paralyzing the power of choices and imposing the impossibility of going beyond the expert’s diagnosis. Julius Wilson (as cited in Rosenhan & Seligman, 1995) was diagnosed as insane and was imprisoned in a psychiatric institution for 60 years. He was castrated before entering the hospital and was released at the age of 96. No evidence was ever found that he was insane and he was never convicted of any crime.

It is safe to say that the expert, in its logical positivist sense, was the only one who had access to the objective reality and therefore could control the reality of the object of research or the actor. This moves in line with the Cartesian philosophy which has a focus on the object and subject relationship with the object under the subjugation of the subject. The perspective of the expert, in its Western version, is inextricably tied to the promotion of the hegemony of the observer (the expert) as the one who understands and knows the truth.

### **Outside the Realm of Psychology**

I argue that the research in humanities and social sciences is mainly influenced by the perspective of the observer, not the actor. This influence has trivialized modes of knowing that do not correspond with the political agendas of the perspective of the expert as an observer. The trend of empirical research in mainstream psychology and the funding of the projects may elucidate the political components within the perspective of the expert who

is entitled to make the right decision. Pinxten (2009) discusses the components of research programs in the context of the observer as an expert and expounds that

In a very general way I hold that scientific research is embedded in the sociopolitical and the cultural context of the West. The socio-political embeddedness implies that funding, promotion chances and even freedom of research will be codetermined by the political context of the researcher to a smaller or larger extent. In the case of the humanities this point has been illustrated by such volumes as Chomsky (1996) and Nader (2000), which show how the development of the Humanities in the 1960s and 1970s of the past century were influenced and sometimes curtailed by the military and political powers of the USA. In a similar vein, the explicit offer of research jobs by the CIA (in the USA) and by M15 (in the UK) from 2006 on through advertisements in the major anthropological journals gave rise to a debate in the discipline; it is clear that the freedom of research is not guaranteed in these circumstances, knowing that already in the past anthropological results have been (ab)used in warfare, without the awareness or consent of the researchers (Houtman, 2006). (p. 192)

## **Expert's Domineering Position and Its Representational Role for the Other**

Katz (1992) discusses how the discourse of the expert in the North American main stream inquiry is tied to an implicit confirmation of domination and power and represents the actor or the other through the lens of the very domination. The actor's or the other's representation, she argues, is reconstructed in the context of the domineering position. Katz (1992) indicates how otherness of the other is transformed through the paradigmatic and syntagmatic prescription of the discourse of power. Explicating the relationship between the researcher and the subject of research within the paradigm of the expert/scientific perspective, Katz (1992) notes that

Building from feminist, postcolonial, and poststructural theories the question of subject position becomes central to a new ethnography in which difference is used productively to question the multiple forms of dominance, exploitation, and oppression. (p. 504)

In her recent work, *Counterclockwise*, Langer (2009) illustrates how the perspective of the expert can impede the process of understanding in that it limits our understanding. In other words, understanding does not *happen*, as the perspective of the expert declares its reign. Instead, the expert's

perspective is only an imposition of a communicative form disguised in the appearance of understanding. The perspective of the expert is one among so many other existing perspectives but when the legitimacy is established for the single expert's perspective, other perspectives are nullified and marginalized. The perspective that there is an expert's perspective that needs to be legitimized is tantamount to generalizing one perspective to so many other possible perspectives.

Langer and Abelson's (1974 study "A patient by any other name," may exemplify how the legitimacy of one perspective known as expert can take control over other perspectives. According to the study, clinicians representing behavioral and analytic schools of thought (i.e., two groups of "experts") viewed a single videotaped interview between a man who had recently applied for a new job and one of the authors. One half of each group was told that the interviewee was a "job applicant," whereas the remaining half was told that he was a "patient." At the end of the videotape, all clinicians were asked to complete a questionnaire evaluating the interviewee. The interviewee was described as fairly well adjusted by the behavioral therapists regardless of the label supplied. This was not the case, however, for the more traditional therapists. When the interviewee was labeled "patient," he was described more significantly more disturbed than he was when he was labeled "job applicant."

## **The Expert's Position of Knowing in Psychology**

Langer (2009) presents numerous experimental cases to demonstrate how the perspective of the expert with a detachment from the perspective of the actor would not only widen the gaps of misunderstanding but also prevent the possibility of disengagement from the dominant viewpoint. She elucidates how the expert's position of knowing in psychology would prevent the expert's search for authentic mode of knowing. Using the language and methods of experimental psychology and on the strength of empirically obtained data, Langer (2009) demonstrates how the sovereignty of knowing would dissipate the exploration of layers outside the established categories; she explicates how the entrapment within the bunkers of knowing would instigate a dogmatic pursuit of the limiting perspective of the experts. In elaborating this, Langer (2009) indicates,

In more than thirty years of research, I've discovered a very important truth about human psychology: certainty is a cruel mindset. It hardens our minds against possibility and closes them to the world we actually live in. When all is certain, there are no choices for us. If there is no doubt, there is no choice.

When we are certain, we are blind to the uncertainties of the world whether we recognize it or not. It is uncertainty that we need to embrace, particularly about our health. If we do so, the payoff is that we create choices and the opportunity to exercise control over our lives. (pp. 24-25)

Langer's remark explains how mainstream psychology has failed to develop a rigorous understanding of the Other as the expert's perspective in mainstream positivist psychology within the Euro-American paradigms rarely explore the actor's perspective and its reference points. She indicates that it is the hegemony of the expert's perspective in the logical positivist-driven psychology that pays no attention to the meanings from the actor's perspective. The hegemony suggests that the Western psychologically constructed concepts can be well applied to everyone in the world; we just need to have the right tools at hand to have the right assessment. Interestingly enough, when there appears to be the signs of contradiction, contraposition, and disagreement on the part of the actor, the actor becomes a problem. The expert's perspective within mainstream positivist psychology has largely problematized the Other whereas endorsing the legitimacy, priority, and superiority of the Western expert's perspective in dealing with the problem (see Bhatia, 2002; Gould, 1996; Grosse, 1997; Teo, 2005).

In highlighting the role of the expert's perspective in imposing the construction of mainstream Western paradigms, Said (1978) indicates,

There has been so massive and calculatedly aggressive attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's rights that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment and democracy are by no means simple and agreed upon concepts that one wither does or does not find, like Easter eggs in the living-room. The breathtaking insouciance of jejune publicists who speak in the name of foreign policy and who have no living notion (or any knowledge at all) of the language of what real people actually speak has fabricated an arid landscape ready for American power to construct there an ersatz model of free market "democracy," without even a trace of doubt that such projects don't exist outside of Swift's Academy of Lagado. (p. xiv)

Discussing numerous examples of the expert's perspective within mainstream psychology and their implications for racism, oppression, crime, suffering, injustice, Teo (2005) writes,

On the background of scientific racism it was not sufficient to state problems, but also to provide arguments and seemingly logical and empirical justifications for these negative assessments. Gobineau (1854-1966) had learned that native

women in certain parts of Oceania who had become mothers by Europeans could no longer become pregnant by their native men. Based on this “evidence” Gobineau (1816-1882) concluded that civilizations that were based on racially distinct groups should never come together. Broca (1864) cited a medical argument to the effect that the large African penis coincided with the size of the African vagina. This meant that a white man could have sex with an African woman because intercourse would be easy and without any inconveniences for the African woman. However, sex between an African man and a white woman would make sex painful for the white woman. In addition, such a union often not lead to reproduction and thus should be avoided. (p. 174)

## **Hegemony of the Expert’s Perspective/the Loss of Meanings and the Constriction of Choices for the Other**

The relationship between the signifier and the signified in mainstream psychology holds the assumption that mainstream positive psychology can define, explain, and predict the signification by virtue of the universally accepted linear methods of thinking. I argue that linear methods of thinking only constitute one mode of thinking, and they cannot explain the wide variety of possible modes of thinking. What is concealed is the presence of meanings and intentions. If the reference points that tend to understand meanings are already preoccupied within certain domination of the signification, how could they ever help us explore the meanings? The reaction against the specific imposition of meaning within mainstream positivist psychology can be found in the works that demonstrate a challenge against the stability of meaning within one specific reference point (see, Derrida, 1976; Gergen, 1990; Lotringer, 1996; Lyotard, 1979/1984; Wittgenstein, 1953/1968).

Examining the deficiencies of the expert’s perspective and its implications for ignoring the meanings, Langer (1997) argues that incarceration within the expert’s perspective would prevent us from exploring the meanings both in core and marginal levels. The focus on the signification from the expert’s perspective would not allow us to revisit the reference point through which the expert’s perspective is bound. Neither would it allow us to highlight or minimize fascicle of the experience of the observation. Calling for a mindful shift, Langer (1997) argues that

An approach to problem solving based on traditional definitions of intelligence relies on the observer’s capacity to use available data in constructing novel hypotheses that in turn reveal different perspectives on familiar questions. Those observers who have considerable familiarity with available data but have not yet become locked into a particular perspective are most likely to



make conceptual contributions that advance our general understanding of an area of research. (pp. 123, 124)

I want to elucidate that once the expert's perspective turns out to be the prescription through which the reality is known and explored, the reality of the actor becomes tantamount to the reality of the perspective through which the actor has been defined. The definition, thus, blocks the possibility of listening to or attending to layers that may exist outside the expert's perspective. This would have huge implications for not only defining a culture, a community, or a person but also the choices through which the culture, community, or the person needs to be approached. Understanding, therefore, is constricted through the lenses of the expert's perspective.

I explicate that if the presentation of conversations are to hold the unquestionability of the expert's perspective and its reference points, conversations and dialogues would fail to detect the emergent meanings within the contextual frameworks of the actor's perspective. Going beyond the expert's perspective would then require both bravery and assertiveness; bravery for not being afraid of losing the expert's perspective and assertiveness for expressing the transformation of the experience of observation. I suggest that a mindful understanding requires the ontological experience of understanding. On the possibility of such a mindful-driven understanding, Gadamer (1988) writes,

To reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one's own point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were. (p. 341)

Studies by Osunde, Tlou, and Brown (1996) indicate how the expert's perspective without understanding the actor's perspective would bring about clichés and stereotyped knowing that work against both knowing and understanding. Their study examined how preservice social studies teachers perceived Africa. In their study of 100 preservice teachers from the United States, Osunde et al. (1996) found that the majority of the concepts associated with Africa were nothing but tigers, disease, jungles, poor, deserts, and superstition. Osunde, Tlou, and Brown (as cited in Tucker, 2009) indicate how the American preservice teachers' exposure to the expert's perspective prevented them from understanding the recondite layers of meaning about Africa. They indicate that

Even though preservice teachers are exposed to an increasing amount of information on Africa through their college courses and seminars and even though the media now presents news on Africa with more frequency, the results

of our data analysis showed that a majority of the preservice social studies teachers had the same misconceptions about Africa that their grandparents and parents had several decades ago. (p. 120)

I need to elucidate that the expert's perspective within mainstream psychology claims values through control, prediction, and the superiority of the expert over the actor. The claim is mainly indebted to the triumph of the natural sciences' discovery of the natural laws and control of the natural forces. Along these lines, the utilitarian implications and consequences of the claim have given rise to a not often questioned hubris that is more overwhelmed by the combination of both profit and domination. The fear of losing the control and disposing the profits would politically tend to focus on the legitimacy of the expert's perspective. Knowing is, thus, legitimized as long as it is verified by methods. From the expert's perspective, we learn about the actor's perspective but we rarely understand that perspective. Understanding, according to Heidegger, is not just a matter of knowing and conducting communication with one another. It is a matter of being. Elaborating Heidegger's ontological presentation of understanding, Ricoeur (1982) explicates that "Instead of asking 'how do we know?,' it will be asked 'what is the mode of being of that being who exists only in understanding?'" (p. 54).

## **Mindfulness and Its Implications for Understanding the Actors' Perspective**

Discussing the implications of such an understanding, Langer (2009) explains how mindfulness can facilitate the process of the understanding as an act. She presents mindfulness not as an epistemological position with a focus on cognition but as an ontological shift that would contribute to a transformation of being. It is through the transformation of being that the act of understanding would give rise to an exploration of the actor's perspective.

I argue that mindfulness in the Langerian version (being different from the other ramifications of mindfulness, which mainly come from the Buddhist traditions) propounds an understanding of the lived experiences and their associative, affective, and marginal meanings. It proposes a cooperative, collaborative, and mutual relationship between the researcher and the subject of the participant of research. This collaboration allows mindfulness about the role of power in the research process. Langerian mindfulness would open up the possibility of examining the praxis of power as discussed by Fine (1994). Without this examination, the subject of research would remain entangled in *the ought and ought not* of the researcher from the researcher's own perspective. Lamenting about the absence of understanding, Andreski (1972) notes that

These experts have not been able to help; and that it cannot be ruled out that they may be making things even worse by misguided therapists. If we saw that whenever a fire brigade comes the flames become even fiercer, we might well begin to wonder what it is that they are squirting, and whether they are not by any chance pouring oil on to the fire. (p. 28)

Langer, Bashner, and Chanowitz (1985), Langer (1997, 2005, 2009) demonstrates how mindfulness is questioning the underlying elements of our ontological assumptions and its corollary for the observer/expert in psychology. She iterates the presence of innovation in the collaborative and dialogical process of a proactive involvement to the effect that the observer welcomes the possibility of the new categories and new information through an ontological openness toward the actor. Mindfulness, to Langer (1985), readily unfolds itself as the horizon of the unknown in the midst of the hegemony of schemas. This is contrary to mindlessness, where the load of schemas dictates the adoption of a single perspective. The monopoly of the observer/expert determines the reality, the needs, and the interests of the actor/the subject of the research.

In line with a similar understanding, Katz (1992) challenges the tyranny of the scientific expert and warns against the pseudo forms of reaching the Other shrouded in the narrow-mindedness of the observer/expert. Katz (1992) reveals the masks of pretentiousness and notes that

As Trinh T Minha-ha (1988) suggests, this is not a project of getting “others” to speak as all knowing subjects of otherness (in the way that the white, upper class, male, Western subject has traditionally constructed himself as the unmarked universal subject), but rather to undermine this very construction and recognize that none of us are all knowing subjectivities, that “difference” and “identity” subvert one another (Trinh, 1986-87, page 29). Recognizing our multiple identities and interdependence creates a ground that belongs to no one not even its creator (Trinh, 1988, page 75). If we recognize the situatedness, and thus partiality, of all knowledges we can develop a politics that is empowering because it is not just about identity—a descriptive term—but about position. (p. 504)

Langer (2005) proposes the relationship between an ontological shift and the arrival of an innovative becoming to the effect that one’s increase of mindfulness can contribute to the enhancement of one’s level of becoming. Illustrating the absence of novelty in the abyss of mindlessness, Langer (2005) suggests that “when we live our lives mindlessly, we don’t see, hear, taste, or experience much of what might turn lives verging on boredom into lives that are rich and exciting” (p. xvii).

Langer (2009) argues that such mindfulness of the expert/observer would entail an attempt to enhance the ontological level of the subject of research as it results in improving his or her well-being. This ontological turn happens in the heart of mindfulness and is associated with a radical transformation of consciousness since it affects the quality of the participants'/actors' being and helps them experience what Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 248) call "ontological authenticity." Langer (2005) considers the essence of such an authenticity in both disengagement and engagement from the self. The observer/the expert needs to mindfully distance himself/herself from the overarching determinant of the self-habituated schema and explore a mindful engagement of the self through a personal renaissance.

## **Mindfulness, Context, Modes of Being, and Their Implications**

Langer's (2009) mindfulness substantiates the necessity of understanding a dialogical relationship between the observer/the expert and the actor/the participant of research and demonstrates how that dialogism may result in a collaborative project of knowledge creation and knowledge management. Langer (2009) presents numerous empirical examples and cases and speaks the language of mainstream psychology to corroborate the inadequacy of that language in addressing the reality of the actor.

Exemplifying the practical implications of a one-sided view intermingled with a mindless-expert perspective in the psychology of negotiations, Faure (2000, as cited in Kremenyuk, 2002) focuses on joint venture negotiations in China and highlights how the absence of a mindful dialogism and the presence of a mindless-driven monologism has led to misunderstanding even in the midst of a perfunctory form of agreement.

Langerian mindfulness (2009) delineates the significant role of context in apprehending the relationship between the observer/expert and the actor/participant or subject of the research. Notwithstanding the use of language of mainstream and experimental psychology, Langer (2009) challenges the inability and failure of the laboratory and context-stripping language in mainstream psychology and argues how mindlessness toward context may confirm the mindless assumptions of the observer. Langer (2009) offers linkage to the works of Reinhartz (1992) and McLellan (1999) as they demonstrate the significance of sociopolitical realities of the actor/subject of the research. A wide variety of international and trade negotiations have failed as a result of the observers' mindlessness of the cultural, socio, and political factors of the actor (see, Kremenyuk, 2002).

Langer (2009) questions the authenticity of mainstream psychology's modes of knowing and the Western-oriented epistemology. Mindfulness, according to Langer (2009), results in acknowledgment of the uncertainty of one's position and one's being. One's position of knowing is inextricably tied to one's mode of being (see Ha'iri Yazdi, 1992). Mindfulness, therefore, can open up the horizon of new modes of being. As the possibility of new modes of being are demonstrated through mindfulness, the psychologist as an observer is not merely circumscribed within the intrapersonal and intrapsychic exploration of the actor but he or she mindfully looks for the contextual variables that contribute to one's position, one's discomfort, one's distress, and one's connectedness to others and the world.

Teo (2005) demonstrates how a lack of understanding the contextual variables may impede the process of reaching the Other in numerous domains of human psychology. He argues how the extension of the Western mode of thinking in the realm of psychology and its branches including health psychology, cultural psychology, social psychology, and so on has widened the gap between the expert in psychology and the subject of research. He cites Sue and Zane (1995) and indicates how the mindlessness within psychological research has led to the negligence of minority groups.

## **Revisiting North American and Mainstream Psychology**

I propound that the revision of the American psychology can be facilitated through the implementation of a genuine mindfulness where the possession of truth is not going to be at the monopoly of a specific culture. This will be associated with an authentic listening to the voices other than those that serve the politically established agenda. This mindfulness will not prescribe the sphere of knowing based on the unquestionably accepted taxonomy of the institutional politics. Rather, it proposes an expansive realm of sensibility that can go beyond the centrality of knowledge in its Western-oriented version (see Fatemi, 2008).

Langer conducts a critique of the positivist psychology and its authoritative claims for owning the truth. Langer's psychology of possibility enumerates the failures and flaws of the positivist-driven psychology and elaborates how mindless-driven psychology can turn out to be imposing in predictions and assessments. In stipulating the ramification of the critique against the positivist system, Langer (1997) argues that

The very notion of intelligence may be clouded by a myth: the belief that being intelligent means knowing what is out there. Many theories of intelligence

assume that there is an absolute reality out there, and the more intelligent the person, the greater his or her awareness of this reality. Great intelligence, in this view, implies an optimal fit between individual and environment. An alternative view, which is at the base of mindful research, is that individuals may always define their relation to their environment in several ways, essentially creating the reality that is out there. What is out there is shaped by how we view it. (p. 100)

Langer's 40-year long research discloses the price that we have paid for the tyrannical mindlessness of mainstream psychology and its unquestionable interventions in defining what is true. Her critique of the objectivity depicts the implications of our deep-seated submission to the ruled-governed world of scientism and indicates how the objective-laden psychology has failed to explore the contexts and their role in meaning making. Langer (1989, 2005, 2009) discusses how the position of knowing in the framework of objectivity has ignored realities of contexts in sundry facets of human life. She suggests that we were better off if we proceeded with the position of not knowing and indicates that

Science, which prides itself on its objectivity, usually hides its choices from us even as it reports its findings. Many design choices that go into even our most rigorous scientific studies affect their outcomes. Greater awareness of these choices would make the findings less absolute and more useful to us. In fact, scientific research is reported in journals as probability statements, although textbooks and popular magazines often report the same results as absolute facts. This change is done to make the science easier for the nonscientists to understand. But what it does, instead, is deceive us by promoting an illusion of stability. That illusion is fostered by taking people out of the equation—what choices the researcher made in sitting up the experiment, on whom it was tested, and under what circumstances. (Langer, 2005, p. 106)

Langer's emphasis on psychology's epistemological crises of objectivity and its dehumanizing implications seems to establish her being an heir to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's challenge of Hegelian rationality and the objectivity of Hegelians such as Martensen calls for revamping the foundations of knowing and knowledge as it does reveal the circumscribing pillars of objectivity in the discourse of rationality. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous Johannes Climacus argues that objectivity cannot give rise to inwardness. Kierkegaard claims that just as lack of objective truth can lead to madness, the "absence of inwardness is madness" too. Climacus illustrates a patient who has just escaped from a mental hospital and is worried about his recognition. He is worried that right after recognition, he will be sent back to the hospital so he thinks to himself:

“What you need to do, then, is to convince everyone every one completely, by the objective truth of what you say, that all is well as far as your sanity is concerned.” As he is walking along and pondering this, he sees a skittle ball lying on the ground. He picks it up and puts it in the tail of his coat. At every step he takes, this ball bumps him, if you please, on his bottom, and every time it bumps him he says, “Boom! The earth is round!” He arrives in the capital city and immediately visits one of his friends. He wants to convince him that he is not crazy and therefore walks back and forth, saying continually “Boom! The earth is round!” (Kierkegaard’s, 1846/1992, p. 195)

For Langer, mainstream psychology has been mainly obsessed with the legitimacy of the observer’s perspective known as the expert’s perspective. Mainstream psychology has also marginalized and neglected the actor’s perspective. The legitimacy of the expert’s perspective, according to Langer, is largely due to psychology’s ownership of objectivity. The possession of objectivity and its accessibility for positivist psychology is explained by virtue of the rigorous methodologies implemented in psychology. Langer’s critique of the monopoly of the perspective in the eyes of the observer namely the expert produces sundry implications for numerous domains of human psychology. Langer (1975, 1985, 2005, 2009) claims that the actor’s perspective can open up a new world of possibilities a world which can be easily concealed to oblivion through the hegemony of the observer’s perspective.

## **A Mindful-Based Psychology**

I propose that a mindful psychology, thus, questions the unquestionability of the expert’s perspective and openly welcomes the possibility of knowing and understanding as it searches for innovative horizons of exploration for theoretical, methodological, and practical issues and problems. This requires not just an epistemic engagement with the abstract-oriented concepts but an ontological involvement with the praxis of the process of knowledge construction. I argue that mindfulness, thus, calls for a transformation of modes of being through a creative and assertive engagement with the social, political, and cultural constituents. This helps the observer embrace the possibility of looking from the perspective of the actor and looking for shared dialogical components while reflexively examining the intersubjectivity of his or her position in directing the dynamics of the perspective.

Langer’s (2009) mindfulness discusses the impediments of an emancipative move toward a mindful project in psychology and examines how the implementation of mindfulness as a psychological and educational project can give rise to a psychology of possibility that is not obliged to concentrate in the camps of mainstream psychology. The psychology of possibility

elucidates the possibility of understanding outside the well-established paradigms of sensibility.

I also propose that the psychology of possibility and its quest for mindfulness may look closely into the incarcerating impacts of reductionist materialism in psychology and would realize the significance of reflecting on the philosophical psychology and its ontological and epistemological role in directing our methodological, theoretical, and practical issues. This may move in line with what Anscombe (as cited in Titus, 2009) highlights as the absence of “an adequate philosophy of psychology” and expounds its vital role in discerning our ethical, etiological, and cultural positions and their implications for the theoretical, empirical, methodological, and practical work of psychology.

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### Author Biography



**Sayyed Mohsen Fatemi** (PhD, University of British Columbia, 2003, Post Doctorate, Harvard University, 2009-2013) has done his postdoctoral studies in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University in areas of social, clinical, health and cross cultural psychology with a focus on Mindfulness. He is an Associate and a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University and works in areas of social and cross cultural psychology. He is a frequently published author and poet with numerous conference presentations. He teaches in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. In addition to Harvard, he has also taught at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis, the University of Toronto, Western

Washington University and the University of British Columbia. Dr. Fatemi's present areas of research focus on the psychological implications of mindfulness for negotiations, media, cultural understanding and communication, creativity and leadership, persuasive and influencing skills, clinical and counseling psychology. He has been the keynote speaker of a number of international conferences and as a licensed and registered psychologist works on the implication of mindfulness for stress management, anxiety management, panic attack, interpersonal problems and personality disorders. He is also a popular guest of multiple television and radio programs and has consulted and coached corporate managers and executives on the application of mindfulness to enhance a broad array of vital business skills. His work includes the development of mindful intercultural understanding, negotiation, communication, conflict resolution, influencing, team building, presentation skills, creative decision making, and crisis management.