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The Psychology of Neoliberalism and the Neoliberalism of Psychology

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In this article, we approach the relationship between neoliberalism and psychological science from the theoretical perspective of cultural psychology. In the first section, we trace how engagement with neoliberal systems results in characteristic tendencies—including a radical abstraction of self from social and material context, an entrepreneurial understanding of self as an ongoing development project, an imperative for personal growth and fulfillment, and an emphasis on affect management for self-regulation—that increasingly constitute the knowledge base of mainstream psychological science. However, as we consider in the second section, psychological science is not just an observer of neoliberalism and its impact on psychological experience. Instead, by studying psychological processes independent of cultural–ecological or historical context and by championing individual growth and affective regulation as the key to optimal well-being, psychological scientists reproduce and reinforce the influence and authority of neoliberal systems. Rather than a disinterested bystander, hegemonic forms of psychological science are thoroughly implicated in the neoliberal project.

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A growing body of work has considered the impact of neoliberal systems on psychological experience (Bay-Cheng, Fitz, Alizaga, & Zucker, 2015; Bhatia & Priya, 2018; Teo, 2018). However, psychological science is not just an observer of neoliberalism and its impact on mind and behavior. Instead, knowledge products and practices of psychological science reproduce, legitimize, and bolster the authority of neoliberalism and its colonization of everyday life (Arfken, 2018; Pickren, 2018; Teo, 2018). From this perspective, an adequate account of the psychology of neoliberalism requires an interrogation of the neoliberalism in psychology.

In this article, we draw upon the theoretical perspective of cultural psychology to illuminate the mutually constitutive relationship of neoliberalism and psychological science along two primary routes. We begin by tracing how the neoliberal movement has shaped psychological experience and therefore the knowledge base of mainstream psychological science. Neoliberal systems build on and reinforce characteristic psychological tendencies of liberal individualism—including radical abstraction of self from context, an entrepreneurial understanding of self as an ongoing development project, an imperative for personal growth and fulfillment, and an emphasis on affect management for self-regulation—that increasingly inform dominant conceptions of mind-in-general. We then consider how hegemonic forms of psychological science, whether deliberately or unwittingly, have been complicit in neoliberal projects. By studying psychological processes independent of cultural–ecological or historical context and by championing individual growth and affective regulation as the key to optimal well-being, psychologists lend scientific authority to neoliberal ideology, grant it legitimacy, and amplify its influence—even if they might intend to do otherwise.

Of course, psychological science is far from monolithic. The relationship with neoliberalism may be more precisely evident for *hegemonic forms of psychological science*. We use this phrase to refer to understandings that emerged from research among people in settings that are Western, educated, industrial, rich, and (supposedly) democratic—in a word, WEIRD (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010)—but have become global standards through processes of intellectual and cultural imperialism. The relationship with neoliberalism may be less evident in traditions of psychology—for example, cultural psychology (Adams & Kurtiş, 2018), indigenous psychology (Kim & Berry, 1993), and liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994)—with epistemic foundations outside the WEIRD settings that disproportionately inform hegemonic psychological science. Indeed, these perspectives may provide resources for resistance and illuminate potential alternatives to a neoliberal psychology. We conclude the article with a brief consideration of this possibility.

Neoliberalism Impacts Psychological Experience

Drawing upon the theoretical framework of cultural psychology, we approach neoliberalism as a cultural form: patterns of ideas and their material manifestations

in institutions, practices, and artifacts (Adams & Markus, 2004). Discussions of neoliberalism often refer to an economic and political movement that came to prominence in the late 1970s. The economic agenda advocated deregulation of markets and free movement of capital with an emphasis on fluidity and globalization (Harvey, 2005). The political agenda advocated *minimal democracy* that limited the role of government to the tasks of securing property rights and ensuring smooth functioning of markets. Associated with this neoliberal political agenda was an understanding of civil society as a collection of individual entities that relate to one another as competitors pursuing their own self-interest.

These economic and political manifestations of neoliberal cultural patterns have links to a set of social philosophies and worldviews that bear strong resemblance to classical liberalism. However, neoliberalism deviates from classical liberalism in its emphasis on freedom—especially from constraints on growth and self-expression (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2004)—above other liberal values (e.g., equality and civic obligation). Sociocultural expressions of neoliberalism extend the logic of market-based liberal capitalism to all aspects of life, including love, family, and civic obligation (e.g., Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2017a; Teo, 2018). The emphasis on freedom and self-determination is attractive, especially for upwardly mobile people eager to transcend constraints on pursuit of their aspirations. However, the promise of neoliberal freedom comes with costs that (at the extreme) include an antagonism toward social commitment that erodes democratic participation (Brown, 2006; Esposito, 2013).

Just as neoliberalism resonates with and amplifies some aspects of classical liberalism, so too does engagement with neoliberal systems resonate with and amplify (some) liberal individualist habits of mind that have disproportionately constituted the knowledge base of hegemonic psychological science. We summarize these neoliberal selfways under the four themes that appear in the left column of Table 1. They include (1) a sense of freedom from constraint that affords an experience of radical abstraction from context; (2) the creation of an entrepreneurial self as project of ongoing development; (3) an imperative for individual growth and personal fulfillment as the key to well-being; and (4) an emphasis on affect regulation as a key to personal success. Although evident in the development of liberal individualism over the course of Eurocentric modernity, the influence of these themes has accelerated with the rise in neoliberalism over the last half-century.

Radical Abstraction

A first and perhaps primary feature of neoliberal selfways is a sense of freedom from constraint—the *liberal* in neoliberal—that reflects and affords an experience of radical abstraction from context. The idea of radical abstraction is a key concept that distinguishes neoliberalism from classic liberalism, and it finds expression in emphases on *deterritorialization* and *fluidity* that aim to eliminate

Table 1. Primary Features of Neoliberalism in Psychology

A: Feature of neoliberalism	B: Implication for psychological experience	C: Role of psychology in reproduction
Radical abstraction (of person from place, time, social and material context)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational mobility (experience of choice about creation and dissolution of relational ties) • Conditional identification (i.e., choice about whether to invest in collective solidarities) • Freedom from constraints on action via spatial and temporal displacement of negative consequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methodological abstraction: priority of WEIRD standards, laboratory experiments, value neutrality • Ontological individualism: reduction of collective phenomena (e.g., racism, well-being) to aggregate of individual experience
Entrepreneurial self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration, innovation, and cultivation of self to create and extend marketable brand • Prioritization of a self that takes risks and bears responsibility for own success (and failure) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological essentialism: ability testing, trait assessment • Responsibilization: blame misfortune on bad choices
Growth imperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom to pursue core aspirations, goals, choice • Freedom from obligations, expectation, norms • Necessitates exploration and elaboration of authentic preferences. • Emphasis on self-expansion, flourishing, and personal fulfillment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influential perspectives: growth mindset, self-determination, self-control, attachment, positive psychology • Individualist conception of empowerment
Affect management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on high-arousal positive affect (excitement, optimism, enthusiasm) as index of health and morality • Production of anxiety due to assumption of risk • Affect regulation as key to success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love as fulfillment • Self-esteem movement • Happiness studies

Note. We define neoliberalism as a cultural pattern including both (a) a political-economic agenda emphasizing limited government and deregulation of markets, and (b) a cultural ideology emphasizing freedom over other liberal values (e.g., equality). The table delineates four features of neoliberalism (Column A), summarizes consequences of these features for psychological experience (Column B), and summarizes the contribution of psychological science to the reproduction of these features (Column C).

barriers to the movement or growth of capital (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2004). At the socioeconomic level, one can observe this feature in the phenomenon of globalization. A major function of global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund has been to implement economic reforms to permit the free flow of capital, so that the vagaries of local processes (especially in the Global South) will no longer operate as limits to expansion (Graeber, 2014). Similarly, one can observe this feature in the phenomenon of financialization: detachment of wealth from place-based sources or concrete relationships (e.g., manufacturing investments, banks) in favor of more fluid or liquid assets (e.g., financial markets) that enable more flexible exchange and freedom of choice (Duménil & Lévy, 2011).

At the cultural–psychological level, the emphases on deterritorialization and fluidity manifest as form of mobility and radical independence from local context (Oishi, Schug, Yuki, & Axt, 2015). On the positive side, the experience of mobility and freedom from material and social constraint enables people to access education and other opportunities, granting them enhanced agency or capacity to pursue their aspirations (Sen, 1999) and choose satisfying social connections (Oishi et al., 2015). Further, freedom of mobility increases intergroup contact and multicultural experience, which can have positive effects on tolerance, intercultural awareness, and personal creativity (see Shweder, Minow, & Markus, 2002). Similarly, settings that afford mobility are associated with interpersonal openness and general trust (Schug, Yuki, & Maddux, 2010; Thomson et al., 2018)

However, the experience of abstraction from context has negative consequences that are often less apparent. The mobility associated with neoliberal systems is associated with processes of cultural standardization as mobile actors seek and create familiar products (e.g., chain stores; Oishi, Miao, Koo, Kisling, & Ratliff, 2012). Standardization erases local identity—including the sort of cultural knowledge that provides an epistemic foundation to question the status quo and to imagine alternatives (Sugarman, 2015; Teo, 2018)—as it transforms cultural patterns for ease of consumption and contributes to the cultural dominance of hegemonic global forms. Because mobility empowers people to choose satisfying connections, it contributes to conditional identification that can undermine collective solidarity and community participation (Oishi, Ishii, & Lun, 2009), particularly when it requires people to shoulder necessary, but potentially burdensome responsibilities and obligations. Moreover, greater mobility does not necessarily translate into psychological well-being; people in regions of the United States characterized by high spatial mobility have better access to resources such as healthcare and fresh food, but they do not report greater life satisfaction (Keefer, Stewart, Palitsky, & Sullivan, 2017).

Perhaps the most important negative consequence is the displacement of costs required to preserve the neoliberal sense of freedom from constraint. Spatial displacement happens when affluent communities outsource violent production practices and harmful byproducts to impoverished communities (Davis, 2006).

Temporal displacement happens when present consumers mortgage the future, passing financial debt and ecological consequences to future generations (Graeber, 2014; Lazzarato, 2015). Both forms of displacement enable a sense of freedom not by eliminating negative consequences that would otherwise constrain action, but instead by transferring those negative consequences to another place and time.

Entrepreneurial Self

In neo-liberalism . . . *Homo economicus* [is] an entrepreneur of himself . . . being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer” (Foucault, 2008, p. 226)

Neoliberal processes of deterritorialization and abstraction from context intensify a responsibility for radical self-authorship. The freedom to act in line with one’s essential qualities or defining aspirations, without restrictions of time and place, fosters an *entrepreneurial self* as a project of ongoing development. The entrepreneurial self represents both a quantitative intensification of and qualitative difference from tendencies associated with independent selfways. Whereas *interdependent self-construal* marks tendencies to adapt self to demands of the social and material environment, and *independent self-construal* marks tendencies to shape environment to better serve one’s sense of authentic self, the concept of *entrepreneurial self* marks a tendency to develop oneself as a product or brand in response to demands of the social and economic marketplace (Gershon, 2011).

The entrepreneurial self draws on two major traditions in European-American thought: (1) “utilitarian” or “vertical” individualism, and (2) “expressive” or “horizontal” individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Triandis, 1995). The first tradition derives from social contract theories of the Enlightenment and ideologies such as the Protestant Work Ethic. It emphasizes economic freedom to acquire private property, to exchange goods and services, and to succeed or fail according to a person’s merits. The second tradition is more associated with movements such as romanticism and postmodernism. It emphasizes political and social freedom for self-determination and self-actualization. Traditionally, these conceptions have been somewhat in conflict; classic liberal philosophers and political conservatives championed utilitarian individualism, but advocates of the welfare state or democratic socialism championed expressive individualism (Bellah et al., 1985). Neoliberalism unifies these two traditions into an ultra-individualist conception of the person as the entrepreneurial self.

Research has documented the rise of the entrepreneurial self since the beginning of the neoliberal social movement in the 1970s. Longitudinal analyses of published books in the United States (Greenfield, 2013) and media language in Norway (Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps, & Rand-Hendriksen, 2007) show increased frequency over the last 40 years for words related to the entrepreneurial self (e.g., *choose, right* or *entitlement, feel*), but decreased frequency for words related to collective solidarity (e.g., *obliged, common/communal, act*). Other

research has documented an “entrepreneurial personality type” (Obschonka et al., 2013)—scoring high in extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness, but low in agreeableness and neuroticism—and has shown that the prevalence of this type in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany is associated with regional prosperity and greater entrepreneurial activity (e.g., startups). As income inequality in these countries has grown, people who exhibit these entrepreneurial personality traits have flourished. Meanwhile, people who exhibit traits more adaptive to interdependence—and regions where they live—have experienced impoverishment.

Growth Imperative

Neoliberal systems promote entrepreneurial selves that continuously pursue growth, self-development, and refinement of their own capital. Neoliberal systems do so not only by providing a sense of *freedom from constraints* (including interference of oppressive others who would impose rules and regulations), but especially by providing *freedom to pursue* defining aspirations—to do what you want or what you like—and thereby to achieve happiness and well-being (see Berlin, 1958, on negative and positive liberty). The U.S. Declaration of Independence asserts life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as the unalienable rights of separate, abstracted individuals. Neoliberal individualism gives a particular form to this pursuit of happiness: happy selves are those that are on the move, physically and psychologically. Being well in neoliberal systems requires selves that are fluid, changing, and growing. They take risks; seek new opportunities; and acquire new skills, talents, interests, and preferences.

Opportunities for choice are key to this neoliberal imperative for growth. Choice not only *allows* people to express themselves and their preferences; in fact, choice *necessitates* the elaboration of preferences. Entrepreneurial selves must develop preferences, attitudes, and goals that they recruit and deploy to navigate everyday worlds that require them to make good choices. Choice allows people to individuate themselves, to reveal their uniqueness, and to exercise control with the aim of getting exactly what they want from any situation. With choice, individuals become the arbiters of what looks, tastes, feels, or indeed *is* good and true. Entrepreneurial selves groomed in cultural ecologies of neoliberal individualism develop habits to experience everyday life in terms of opportunities for choice and to construct their behavior as the product of their own choices (Savani, Markus, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2010; Sugarman, 2015; Teo, 2018).

The exercise of choice has demonstrably positive consequences for individual motivation, health, and psychological well-being (e.g., Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Iyengar, 2010), but these consequences are not distributed equally across socioeconomic contexts. These benefits are particularly evident for people in over-privileged settings (e.g., affluent White Americans), who get to make many

choices among good alternatives. Everyday realities of people in these settings not only grant them choices about how to live their lives, but also encourage them to express themselves through the choices they make. When local realities readily afford easy exercise of choice, everything—including relationships (Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004; Carey & Markus, 2017)—can be a matter of choice. People experience freedom to exercise this choice to contract relationships that provide optimal opportunities for self-expansion (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013).

Although the neoliberal emphasis on self-expressive choice can afford an experience of autonomy and freedom to pursue ever-expanding aspirations, research suggests that it is not without costs. An excess of choice is associated with experiences of paralysis and dissatisfaction with one's decisions (e.g., Botti & Iyengar, 2004). In addition, an emphasis on individual choice contributes to the neoliberal discourse of individual responsabilization, whereby people understand societal problems as the result of poor individual choices. For example, studies show that engaging in choice can increase tendencies toward victim-blaming, can reduce empathy, and can reduce support for social welfare policies (Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2011).

Affect Management

We should think of consumption as an enterprise activity by which the individual, precisely on the basis of the capital he has at his disposal, will produce something that will be his own satisfaction (Foucault, 2008, p. 226).

Society as a whole will not be asked to guarantee individuals against risks. . . . Society, or rather the economy, will merely [accord] everyone a sort of economic space within which they can take on and confront risks (Foucault, 2008, p. 144).

Neoliberal systems are associated with an emphasis on feelings (over and above Enlightenment rationality) that some observers have referred to as the “affective turn” (Anderson, 2016). Part of the reason for the emphasis on feelings has to do with the emphasis on freedom of choice and the pursuit of happiness that Foucault notes in the first passage that we quote above. Faced with a wide range of choices in an increasingly marketized world, knowing what one likes or prefers becomes more important than ever as a guide to help a person navigate the overabundance of possibilities. Positive affect is particularly important, both as a goal of choice and as evidence that one has made the right choice.

The emphasis on feeling good is an active ingredient in many positive behavioral outcomes. As with the growth imperative, though, the significance of positive feelings as a desired or ideal state gains particular legitimacy in neoliberal individualist contexts. Most people want to feel positive states more than negative ones, and the freedom of choice associated with the neoliberal individualist sense of abstraction from context affords the opportunity to pursue such positive states. Consistent with this assertion, research suggests that the difference in preference

for positive over negative states is greater in settings associated with neoliberal individualism (for a review see Tsai & Clobert, 2019). The rise in positive affect is evident in social discourse, where phrases such as “You have to believe in yourself before anything is possible” or “You have to love yourself before you can love someone else” became relatively frequent after 1980 (Twenge, 2006).

Another reason for the neoliberal emphasis on feelings has to do with the emphasis on entrepreneurial risk that Foucault notes in the second passage that we quote above. The entrepreneurial self is not only self-reliant, but actively seeks risks in innovative enterprise to increase its value. Such risk seeking requires physiological arousal. Accordingly, people who regularly engage settings informed by neoliberal individualism tend to value what Tsai (2007) calls *high arousal positive* states like excitement, energy, and enthusiasm. These states energize people to engage in the risky business of entrepreneurial self-development.

At the same time, these risks can generate considerable anxiety. The neoliberal experience of freedom from constraint can liberate people to achieve aspirations and personal fulfillment, but it also renders them solely responsible for success and weakens broader solidarities that might otherwise buffer against failure (Teo, 2018). In the face of such anxiety, successful behavior becomes a matter of affect regulation. One must pursue and amplify positive feelings while avoiding, reframing, or down-regulating negative feelings (Cabanas, 2018).

To conclude our initial discussion by way of summary, a cultural–psychological approach illuminates how neoliberal systems afford habits of mind and ways of being that we refer to as neoliberal selfways. The core features of these neoliberal selfways include a sense of radical abstraction from social and material context, an entrepreneurial approach to self as an ongoing development project, an imperative for individual growth and personal fulfillment, and an emphasis on affect regulation. In turn, these core features of neoliberal selfways increasingly inform hegemonic models of subjectivity in mainstream psychological science. Indeed, one can understand much of the knowledge base in psychological science as it has developed over the last half-century as a descriptive account of life in neoliberal systems.

Psychological Science as a Site for Reproduction of Neoliberal Systems

The preceding section considers how neoliberal systems promote the habits of mind that constitute descriptive norms of hegemonic psychological science—what scientists understand to be the typical patterns of normal human being. However, the influence of psychological science is not merely as a descriptive account of human experience; in addition, people actively appropriate the knowledge base of psychology to promote some habits of mind and ways of being over others. Institutional actors take the neoliberal selfways documented in psychological research, elevate them to the level of natural standard, invest them with prescriptive force,

and impose them upon institutional practices of social regulation (Klein, 2017a, 2017b). Far from being a disinterested bystander, hegemonic forms of psychological science provide an epistemic foundation for—and sometimes participate in—the naturalization, legitimation, and institutionalization of neoliberalism and its consequences. In this section, we consider how hegemonic forms of psychological science have contributed to the reproduction of neoliberal systems.

In some cases, this contribution has been relatively indirect. That is, psychological science has provided the knowledge base that proponents of neoliberalism have appropriated as a useful tool. The intellectual architects of neoliberalism crafted this worldview from an epistemology that prioritized psychology and subjective experience over more sociological and cultural perspectives (Gane, 2014). Due to the importance that neoliberalism places on investment in human capital as a source of creativity, growth, and expansion (Foucault, 2008), proponents have prioritized psychology as the scientific source of techniques for forming individuals who would exemplify neoliberal selfways (Bhatia & Priya, 2018; Klein, 2017b). Proponents of neoliberalism in U.S. and U.K. governments have appropriated techniques from behavioral economics—a discipline with deep roots in experimental social psychology—to encourage individuals to behave more like the self-interested, rational agents that neoliberalism assumes (Jones, Pykett, & Whitehead, 2013; McMahon, 2015). Perhaps most tellingly, politically conservative groups, economic institutions, and other proponents of neoliberalism have provided generous support to perspectives of psychological science (such as the positive psychology movement, which stresses personal growth and positive affect as essential self-goals; Binkley, 2014; Ehrenreich, 2009) that provide knowledge that supports neoliberal objectives.

In other cases, hegemonic forms of psychological science have contributed more directly to the reproduction of neoliberal systems. To be clear, we do not suggest that psychologists necessarily intend in some deliberate fashion to contribute to neoliberal systems, and we acknowledge that they often may desire their work to serve opposite aims. And yet, regardless of intention or awareness, psychologists can unwittingly contribute to the reproduction of neoliberal systems, even when they explicitly desire otherwise, to the extent that their work promotes the neoliberal selfways that we noted in the previous section.

Radical Abstraction

Hegemonic forms of psychological science do not merely document the neoliberal abstraction of experience from social and material context. Instead, they reproduce and amplify this abstraction via choice of methods and roots in ontological individualism (Stryker, 1997).

Methodological abstraction. Methodological practices of psychological science are an especially powerful site for neoliberal individualist abstraction.

As cultural psychologists have argued (e.g., Shweder, 1990), methodological developments have increasingly incentivized psychologists to focus research and explanation on isolated phenomenological (or even neurological) responses of individuals in ways that abstract complex social phenomena from cultural and historical context. Hegemonic psychological science has developed into a science of *variables* (Schiff, 2017) committed to extracting universal mechanisms and processes from the “noise” of multidetermined contextual experience (Shweder, 1990). Psychological scientists working in hegemonic traditions generally hold great reverence for the artificial environment of the experimental laboratory because it provides control and relative precision of observation and measurement. However, this control and precision amount to practices of abstraction that strip away content and purport to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries.

It has become somewhat commonplace to observe that standard knowledge in hegemonic psychological science has its basis in WEIRD cultural settings (Henrich et al., 2010). Theory and research in hegemonic psychology typically ignores experiences of the non-WEIRD global majority or assimilates their experiences to WEIRD cultural categories. Beyond geographic abstraction, dominant approaches also foster a temporal orientation toward a presumed universal present. Psychologists working in these approaches tend to employ historical data in a nomothetic (rather than an idiographic) sense. Theorists point to historical examples only to demonstrate the presumed universality of some phenomenon. The historicity of phenomena—their grounding or delimitation in temporal and spatial contexts—generally falls outside the province of hegemonic psychological science (Brown & Lunt, 2002).

Connected to these deterritorializing and ahistoricizing methodological tendencies is an emphasis on “value-neutral” and objective science. In recent years, some psychologists have argued that researchers should construct studies in such a way that they might lend equal weight to a variety of possible outcomes with distinct political implications (Stevens, Jussim, Anglin, & Honeycutt, 2018; Washburn et al., 2015). Although framed as a justifiable plea for greater objectivity, attempts to eliminate observers and their values from the research process often neutralize the capacity of research to directly confront the political forces and social injustices that motivated it in the first place (Deleuze, 1983; Sears, 1994). Rather than a positionless view from nowhere, value neutrality can maintain commitments to the status quo and enforce assimilation to a WEIRD epistemic standpoint (Adams & Salter, 2019).

Ontological individualism. According to Markus and Kitayama (1994), social psychology suffers from a “collective fear of the collective”: an evaluative stance that regards group and situational dependencies as the root of most evil. This evaluative stance portrays obedience, conformity, and social influence as the “dark side” of humanity’s potential, rather than features of human psychology

that make possible the benefits of social and cultural life. It tends to valorize the rationality of free-thinking individuals and to document how group minds, crowds, and social influence compromise this rationality (Greenwood, 2004). This evaluative stance may have roots in justifiable concern about the complicity of otherwise enlightened citizens in authoritarianism and mass atrocities, but the point for present purposes is that this evaluative stance resonates clearly with the disdain for public citizenship that is a key feature of neoliberal individualism.

Beyond an evaluative stance that denigrates sociality, psychological science contributes to neoliberal abstraction via an *ontological individualism*—the reduction of sociocultural phenomena to the aggregated acts of inherently independent individuals—that informs both theory and method (Stryker, 1997). A particularly consequential example of this form of abstraction is the way in which psychological science approaches racism and other manifestations of structural oppression. Rather than define racism as a set of cultural patterns—structures of belief and affect, made manifest in institutional practices and material realities—psychologists tend to approach racism as the product of individual bias (Adams, Biernat, Branscombe, Crandall, & Wrightsman, 2008; Gordon, 2015). This construction of racism as individual bias is evident in both research reports and educational resources (e.g., textbooks; Adams, Edkins, Lacka, Pickett, & Cheryan, 2008). One consequence of this construction is to minimize the problem; rather than an issue of historical injustice and material violence, racism becomes a narrower problem of individual bias that constitutes a less pressing social issue and requires less stringent measures to address. Another consequence is to transform antiracism efforts into prejudice-reduction interventions. That is, the construction of racism as individual bias orients efforts at remedy toward changing hearts and minds or producing intergroup harmony, rather than attempts to restore justice and to overturn a racist status quo (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010; Hammack, 2011; Wetherell, 2012).

Besides constructing racism as a problem of individual prejudice, mainstream psychological theory and research amplifies neoliberal individualism by pathologizing racism perception. Survey research consistently shows that people from historically marginalized racial groups tend to perceive greater racism in U.S. society than do White Americans. One might understand such tendencies of racism perception as reasonable vigilance about the dangerous reality of societal racism. Instead, hegemonic perspectives of psychological science, disproportionately informed by White racial sensibilities, tend to portray these tendencies as (excessive) stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999), (over)sensitivity about rejection (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002), or other forms of “perceptual baggage” (Johnson, Simmons, Trawalter, Ferguson, & Reed, 2003, p. 621). Moreover, hegemonic perspectives tend to blame these tendencies—rather than life in a racist society—as the source of undue stress, underperformance, damaged social

relationships, and reduced well-being (Anglin, Greenspoon, Lighty, & Ellman, 2016; Orom, Sharma, Homish, Underwood, & Homish, 2017).

One might argue that tendencies to downplay or ignore racism are adaptive or conducive to well-being to the extent that they enable people to manage anxiety and to remain open to interpersonal and professional opportunities that concern about racism might inhibit. This response helps to illuminate another manifestation of individualist ontology in hegemonic psychological science that reflects and reproduces neoliberal abstraction: a conception of well-being that emphasizes (short-term) benefit to individuals without regard to temporal and social context. Tendencies to ignore racism may enable persistence and individual achievement in the face of adversity, but they also have negative consequences. At the level of individual well-being, the prescription to downplay the threat of racism and to persist in the face of racist adversity contributes to such forms of neoliberal responsabilization as “John Henryism”: counterproductive tendencies to exert superhuman effort to overcome structural barriers that, in the long term, undermine health through exhaustion (Bennett et al., 2004). More generally, the pursuit of individual well-being via successful adaptation or adjustment to racist realities leaves intact those oppressive realities and the ongoing threat that they pose to the person and broader communities. Rather than a strategy of individual adjustment to unhealthy realities, a more sociocultural conception of well-being suggests strategies of “creative maladjustment” (King, 1968; also see Adams, Salter, Kurtiş, Naemi, & Estrada-Villalta, 2018; Allen & Leach, 2018) that reflect and promote the imagination of alternatives and collective action to change an unhealthy status quo.

Finally, this example helps to illustrate a point we raised earlier concerning the tendency of calls for value neutrality to enforce assimilation to a WEIRD epistemic standpoint. Who is to say which views (e.g., about the extent of racism) best reflect objective reality? Beliefs about objective reality can vary across social location, and what an institution treats as reasonable or objective is often more about the power to impose a collective construction of reality than it is the direct perception of that reality. In terms of the present example, this reasoning suggests that scientific consensus about the true level of racism is not a neutral or objective reading of reality, but instead rests upon an epistemic foundation associated with White racial experience that disproportionately constitutes the science. To the extent that observers make judgments in terms of this standard, they are likely to delegitimize claims of societal racism and undermine motivations to address it. In this and other cases, calls for unbiased objectivity are likely to construct neutrality in terms that are rooted in (and biased toward) White racial sensibilities.

Entrepreneurial Self

Again, psychological science does not merely document how engagement with neoliberal systems affords habitual patterns of an entrepreneurial

self. Instead, psychological science reproduces and amplifies the emergence of an entrepreneurial self via processes of psychological essentialism and responsabilization.

Psychological essentialism. The emergence of an entrepreneurial self implies something like *psychological essentialism*: an understanding of mind and behavior as the product of core individual attributes that are the defining or authentic foundation of a person's life trajectory (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). As part of the project of personal development, the entrepreneurial self encourages tendencies to discover, monitor, assess, amplify, and cultivate important traits, abilities, or other core attributes. Many features of hegemonic psychological science not only afford an essentialist understanding of the person as a bundle of defining attributes, but also provide tools for measuring these essential attributes.

An important manifestation of psychological science that reflects and promotes this feature of entrepreneurial self is the industry of psychological testing. One focus of psychological testing is ability assessment. The industry of intelligence and other ability tests played a prominent role in the development of psychological science, and this industry continues to be a growth area of the field (Croizet, 2008; Winston, 2018). Another focus of psychological testing is assessment of broader traits and interests. Employers, managers, and human resource professionals use such tests not only to select personnel with desired attributes, but also to guide professional development in directions that match organizational goals (Bhatia & Priya, 2018).

Again, the point is that practices of psychological testing do not simply draw upon, but also bolster and extend a neoliberal understanding of the person as a bundle of traits and abilities (Shweder, 1990). For example, Bhatia (2018) illuminates how practices of personality testing and psychological assessment in information technology firms and call centers of India shape young employees to understand themselves in terms of neoliberal individualism and the entrepreneurial self. Although the resulting neoliberal tendencies may be productive in the industrial context, they colonize and displace habits of mind and ways of being (e.g., concerning family, relationships, aspirations) that may be more generally adaptive for life in the communities that these workers inhabit outside the workplace (Bhatia & Priya, 2018).

Beyond issues of mental colonization, the widespread practice of testing promotes a construction of ability as a feature of individual people abstracted from context. It deflects attention away from sociocultural forces—both barriers that inhibit performance of people from marginalized groups and scaffolding that enhances performance of people from dominant groups—that systematically structure performance on such tests, and it thereby affords the attribution of sociocultural differences in performance to natural deficits in ability. Regardless of practitioner intention or awareness, the widespread practice of ability testing

serves to legitimize inequality and to justify hierarchical societal arrangements (Croizet, 2011). Proponents of neoliberalism draw upon such interpretations of psychological testing to argue that economic inequality results from natural differences in ability and to legitimize budget cuts to social welfare programs that they see as futile, inefficient, or even pernicious (Winston, 2018).

Responsibilization. Another way in which psychological science amplifies the entrepreneurial self is through personal responsabilization. By explaining socially structured phenomena as the outcome of individual processes, psychological science renders people responsible for their outcomes. They not only bear the onus for making good things happen, but also must shoulder blame when bad things happen (Brown, 2006; McDonald, Gough, Wearing, & Deville, 2017).

For example, the emphasis on internal processes as the source of health problems not only obscures the effect of external structures on life outcomes and well-being, but also renders people responsible for these problems. This is particularly evident in problems of overconsumption (e.g., obesity, substance abuse, etc.). Patterns of explanation in psychological science reflect and reproduce the idea that such problems arise from poor choices and lack of willpower rather than the sociocultural constitution of desire and consumption behavior via ubiquitous exposure to advertising media and marketing practices (McDonald et al., 2017).

Responsibilization is evident not only in standard explanations for health and illness, but also in explanations for misfortune more generally. Social and scientific explanations for misfortune tend to construct it as the result of bad choices—for example, to stay versus evacuate when faced with a catastrophic storm—rather than understand such responses as a negotiation with social and material constraints (Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009). Similarly, discourses of individual responsibility shape understandings of poverty and economic inequality. Reflecting neoliberal individualistic models of mind and behavior, prevalent constructions of economic growth emphasize characteristics of self-interested individuals capable of acting independently from their material and societal context (Klein, 2017b). From this perspective, economic scarcity is the result of poor choices and deficient attributes, such as insufficient motivation or grit (Duckworth, 2016), that deviate from the individualistic standard and require corrective interventions (Estrada-Villalta & Adams, 2018). Again, policy makers draw upon these interpretations to legitimize neoliberal policies, as when U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Ben Carson, defended plans for disinvestment in public housing by expressing the belief that “poverty to a large extent is also a state of mind” that social welfare programs perpetuate (Alcindor, 2017).

Growth Imperative

Hegemonic perspectives of psychological science have been a primary site for the reproduction of the neoliberal growth imperative. Many theories within

social psychology consider personal growth and development to be the pinnacle of human experience, a mark of optimal well-being. Indeed, a widely used scale of psychological well-being (Ryff et al., 2007) includes the dimension of Personal Growth (e.g., “For me life has been a continuous process of learning, changing and growth”) as a defining feature, which survey respondents in the United States tend to endorse at the highest levels (Plaut, Markus, & Lachman, 2009). Similarly, the growth imperative is evident in the theory of growth mindset (Dweck, 2006): the belief that individual qualities such as intelligence are not fixed or limited capacities, but instead are qualities that an entrepreneurial self can cultivate and extend through effort and hard work. More generally, the growth imperative is evident in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), and positive psychology approaches more generally (e.g. Diener, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Common to these perspectives is the idea that greater freedom—whether autonomy at work; novel experiences; or supportive, non-controlling relationships that provide a secure base for exploration—promotes individual flourishing, personal fulfillment, achievement of one’s dreams, and actualization of one’s potential. As scholars have noted of positive psychology (Cabanas, 2018; see also Becker & Maracek, 2008), the emphasis on growth and personal fulfillment in these influential theoretical perspectives not only reflects, but also serves to legitimize neoliberalism and associated selfways.

The neoliberal growth imperative is similarly evident in the conceptions of *empowerment* that inform hegemonic psychological science. Writing about this topic in the context of feminism, Rutherford (2018) notes how hegemonic perspectives of psychological science construct women’s empowerment in ways—as self-reliance, self-management, freedom from social constraint, control over one’s life, and liberty to chart one’s destiny—that are consistent not only with neoliberal individualism, but also (and somewhat ironically) with androcentrism (Riger, 1993). The connection to androcentrism helps to illuminate how this conception of empowerment may be counterproductive for feminist (and other forms of) liberation from social oppression. Although neoliberal empowerment may enable individuals to pursue their aspirations, it often does so at the expense of broader interdependence and solidarities (Dutt, Grabe, & Castro, 2015; Kurtiş, Adams, & Estrada-Villalta, 2016). Rather than forms of social constraint that constitute a drag on individual growth and spectacular achievement of a well-endowed few, these broader solidarities can constitute the basis for more collective forms of empowerment that create the conditions of possibility for broader, more sustainable well-being. To be clear, the point here is not to argue against liberation (e.g., from suffering or oppression), but instead to question the extent to which the neoliberal construction of liberation or empowerment evident in hegemonic forms of psychological science is truly liberatory (and for whom; Kurtiş & Adams, 2015).

Affect Management

Finally, hegemonic perspectives of psychological science have been a primary site of the neoliberal emphasis on feeling (Teo, 2018). A prominent example is self-determination theory (and similar perspectives; see Ryan & Deci, 2017). Grounded in the neoliberal individualist experience of freedom from material constraint, self-determination theory promotes the sense that people should pursue core aspirations that express their most authentic strivings, beyond the compulsion of mere material necessity. From this perspective, the force that directs pursuit of fulfillment should be opportunities for full self-expression and deep emotional involvement associated with expressive and romantic forms of individualism (Bellah et al., 1985; Teo, 2018).

Love as fulfillment. An emphasis on neoliberal individualism does not necessarily equate to a devaluation of relationship. Rather, neoliberal individualism constructs connection—whether mating/dating, friend, or parent–child relations—as another site for self-expression, self-expansion (e.g., Aron et al., 1991, 2013) and pursuit of personal fulfillment. Here again, psychological science emerges as a primary site for the (re)production of neoliberal relationality. Theory and research in social psychology tend to equate *relationship* with mating and dating forms, and they tend to reflect and promote a voluntaristic construction of these and other relationship forms as the product of choice (Adams et al., 2012). This construction is associated with tendencies to choose connections that provide optimal satisfaction (with minimal constraint), a promotion-oriented pursuit of personal fulfillment (versus prevention-oriented assurance of support), an emphasis on feelings and emotional care (versus materiality of care; Coe, 2011), and narrow investment in nuclear family (rather than broader solidarities; Kurtiş & Adams, 2015; Salter & Adams, 2012). Consistent with neoliberal promises of personal fulfillment, these voluntaristic constructions of love and relationship may liberate the fortunate minority who are extraordinarily well-endowed or well-positioned in the relationship market to obtain satisfying outcomes. However, research suggests that these constructions of love are harmful to the majority of people with more ordinary characteristics, who must struggle to attract and create their own connections in the absence of environmentally afforded ties (Plaut, Adams, & Anderson, 2009; see also Oishi & Kesebir, 2012).

Self-esteem movement. In addition to being the science of love, psychology can also lay claim to being the science of happiness (Wilson, 1967; Diener & Seligman, 2002). One source of the emphasis on happiness and positive affect in psychological science was the self-esteem movement that emerged in the 1970s. A central theme of this movement was that feeling good about oneself—rather than, for example, attending to one's shortcomings to better direct efforts at

self-improvement—is the key to successful achievement, relationships, health, and life in general. Another central theme has been that self-esteem and happiness are matters of choice and personal responsibility. They are individual rather than group projects, and a person owes it to herself to ignore feedback from haters who would undermine her self-esteem.

We do not deny that feeling good about oneself is usually preferable to the opposite. Instead, our point is to recognize that this emphasis in hegemonic psychological science on high self-esteem and positive feeling reflects and reproduces the neoliberal emphasis on affect management. Having a high overall evaluation of one's value and a positive or optimistic outlook constitute an important survival strategy in a world that, according to best-selling cultural products during the height of the self-esteem movement, requires people to *Be Your Own Best Friend*, and *Learn to Love Yourself* (Maasen, Sutter, & Duttweiler, 2007).

Happiness studies. The idea that individuals should feel good about their actions and that feeling good is an end in itself (Binkley, 2014; Wierzbicka, 1994) gains force from the abundance of research in mainstream psychological science on happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being (e.g., Diener, Seligman, Choi, & Oishi, 2018). The neoliberal character of happiness studies in hegemonic psychological science is evident not only in the centrality of the topic, but also in prevailing constructions of happiness. Hegemonic perspectives of psychological science typically impose a neoliberal individualist construction of happiness as high arousal positive affect (Tsai, 2007). According to this standard, it is not sufficient to achieve contentment or absence of negative feelings; in addition, psychologists tend to prescribe the more active or energetic form of happiness that fulfills requirements of neoliberal affect management: namely, to motivate entrepreneurial risk and to counter anxiety associated with responsabilization of failure (De La Fabian & Stecher, 2017).

Although this high-energy pursuit of high arousal positive affect may be adaptive for neoliberal affect management, it also has drawbacks. Qualitative studies suggest that people in a variety of contemporary neoliberal environments internalize blame for anxiety and negative experiences, wishing they could be more adept at focusing on the positive (Scharff, 2016; Sweet, 2018). A large meta-analysis suggests that holding negative attitudes toward negative affect is strongly associated with experiencing depression (Yoon, Dang, Metz, & Rottenberg, 2018). The demand for positive affect demonizes and imposes silence on killjoys who dare to spoil the party by raising awareness of injustice (Ahmed, 2010). Of particular relevance for current purposes, critics argue that the emphasis on high-energy positive affect is unavailable to most people on the planet (Becker & Maracek, 2008) and unsustainable at both a personal and collective level (Kjell, 2011). By prescribing high arousal positive affect, psychological science may contribute to overconsumption, production of social inequality, and ecological catastrophe.

Resisting Neoliberalism, Decolonizing Psychology

Rather than a detached observer of neoliberalism and its psychological consequences, we have proposed that psychological science is an important site of neoliberalism. More precisely, we propose that the relationship between psychology and neoliberal selfways is particularly strong in hegemonic forms of psychological science with epistemic foundations in WEIRD societies. This relationship may be less evident in traditions of psychology with epistemic foundations beyond WEIRD settings. This qualification is important not only because it avoids an intellectually imperialist assimilation of those traditions to WEIRD psychology, but also because these traditions of psychology may provide inspiration and direction for researchers and practitioners who desire to forge a psychological science that resists neoliberalism.

A useful tool for theorizing resistance to neoliberalism (in psychology and otherwise) comes from various perspectives of “theory from the South” (TFTS; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; see also de Sousa Santos, 2014). A prevalent tendency in academic work is to regard Majority-World communities of the Global South (and racially marginalized communities in the Global North) merely as peripheral sites for secondary application of basic theory. In contrast, the idea of TFTS centers the experience of Majority-World communities as a privileged site for the development of basic theory to explain events in general (including in the Global North).

Perspectives of TFTS offer an epistemic standpoint from which to decolonize psychology: to articulate new intellectual traditions free from the connection to neoliberal individualist selfways (Fanon, 1961/1965, p. 316; see also Adams, Dobles, Gomez, Kurtiş, & Molina, 2015). One decolonial strategy is *indigenization*, in which researchers from marginalized settings draw upon place-based knowledge (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) to deflect the imposition of hegemonic (typically WEIRD) knowledge traditions and to suggest habits of mind and ways of being better attuned to local realities. If neoliberalism finds fertile ground in the individualist selfways that inform hegemonic psychological science, then indigenous knowledge traditions in settings where more relational or interdependent selfways are prominent may be an important source of alternatives to a neoliberal psychology (Liu, 2015; Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013b).

However, the value of indigenous and other racially marginalized perspectives as a decolonial tool is not simply to produce better knowledge for application in associated communities. Resonating with the idea of TFTS, the decolonial potential of indigenous knowledge increases dramatically when one turns the analytic lens, applies it to *denaturalize* taken-for-granted assumptions about supposedly natural tendencies of human beings in general.

As an example, consider again the neoliberal psychological emphasis on freedom and growth. Perspectives of decolonial theory (e.g., Grosfoguel, 2002;

Mignolo, 2011), rooted in epistemic standpoints of the Global South, emphasize that the freedom from constraint associated with the neoliberal individualist pursuit of growth is not politically innocent. Instead, societies in the Global North have obtained this freedom through appropriation of others' land, resources, and labor over the past 500 years of Eurocentric global domination. The violence required to make possible this freedom from constraint for some, while imposing intolerable conditions on others, is one reason to question the neoliberal psychological emphasis on personal growth and expansion (Adams, Estrada-Villalta, & Gómez Ordoñez, 2018).

Still, the violence associated with neoliberal freedom and growth is not simply about the unequal distribution of opportunities to enjoy them. More generally, decolonial perspectives argue that the exercise of neoliberal freedom and growth by the privileged global minority reproduces colonial violence through the production of inequality and ecological degradation that prompts concerns about sustainable well-being. In a synchronic sense, it is unlikely that all people who presently inhabit the planet can have access to resources necessary to fuel the prescription for neoliberal psychological growth (Becker & Maracek, 2008). In a diachronic sense, there are indications that current consumption patterns spurred by the desire for personal growth are driving Earth societies toward an impending ecological plateau, meaning that these ways of being will not be possible for future generations (or even older versions of our current selves; Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017; Trawick & Hornborg, 2015). Simply put, epistemic standpoints of the Global South illuminate the possibility that these core themes of hegemonic psychological science are not just-naturally good, but instead reproduce violence associated with colonialism and White supremacy (Adams et al., 2018).

Besides indigenization and denaturalization, a third decolonial strategy is *accompaniment*, whereby researchers come down from their ivory towers and work alongside inhabitants of marginalized communities in their struggles for social justice (Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013a; Watkins, 2015). The decolonial strength of accompaniment approaches is the emphasis on embedded engagement rather than “basic” research or “pure” knowledge abstracted from social and historical context. Whereas hegemonic psychological science reproduces neoliberal abstraction via emphases on quantification, experimental method, and laboratory control (Shweder, 1990), proponents of the accompaniment approach argue that it affords resistance to neoliberal abstraction—and comes closer to truth—via participatory and place-based research that takes seriously particularities of context and content (Segalo, Manoff, & Fine, 2015).

For readers who desire practical recommendations for resisting neoliberalism, these decolonial strategies provide a sense of direction. The accompaniment strategy recommends engagement with others in creation of community solidarity. The indigenization strategy recommends commitment to educate oneself about multiple knowledge traditions. The denaturalization strategy recommends that one

draw upon these traditions not (just) to understand cultural “Others,” but (instead) as standpoints from which to appreciate one’s own experience in relationship to cultural and historical context. Although relatively modest steps, the goal is to promote epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) and creative maladjustment (King, 1968) to neoliberal systems that promote atomistic responses to collective problems.

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