

Society for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology (APA Division 24)
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Madness, Mysticism, and the Reenchantment of Psychology
Presidential Theme: Justin M. Karter, PhD

To live in this moment of history is to feel something slipping away. What, precisely, is being lost is difficult to name, though one can sense it in the loneliness that has become the defining mood of our age. We have acquired extraordinary powers of prediction, of surveillance, of manipulation; we can map neural pathways, track the fluctuations of serotonin, and analyze the statistical probabilities of human decision-making. And yet, for all this mastery, we find ourselves unmoored. Our connections to one another are fragile and mediated, our trust in what we once called reality is wavering, and our relationship to the earth itself has been reduced to one of extraction and domination. We have gained technical precision, but we have lost something more fundamental: a sense of depth, mystery, and participation in something irreducible.

Psychology, as the discipline ostensibly devoted to understanding the human mind, ought to have been a source of resistance to this diminishment. It may have reminded us that we are not machines, that consciousness is not merely a sum of calculable inputs, and that our lives are not simply problems to be solved. And yet, from its very origins, psychology has operated on a basic, unexamined assumption: that experience is best understood not in its immediacy or relational embeddedness, but in abstraction, not in the way it is lived, between people and within histories, but in the way it can be isolated, measured, and compared. In its quest to join the ranks of the hard sciences, psychology has often enacted what Husserl called a "surreptitious substitution" — exchanging lived reality for models, equations, and technical explanations that promise control but obscure the depths of human existence.

But the trouble runs deeper still. This substitution is not confined to the discipline of psychology alone; it has permeated the entire framework of modern thought, shaping the epistemic assumptions of our time. We live in a disenchanted world—in the Weberian sense of a secularized society and also in the sense that we have trained ourselves to distrust whatever resists calculation. We have, in effect, trained ourselves to believe that whatever cannot be submitted to the logic of the algorithm or the balance sheet—love, beauty, longing, despair—is at best an epiphenomenon, and at worst, a kind of metaphysical embarrassment. We have learned to think of love as attachment patterns, of suffering as a biochemical malfunction, of the self as a bundle of cognitive biases and evolutionary imperatives. We have learned to approach the Other with suspicion, to see unpredictability as a threat, to treat reality itself as something to be brought under control. And, in the process, we have found ourselves more anxious, more estranged, more lonely.

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that this mechanizing tendency has never been the only current within psychology. Depth psychology, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and humanistic approaches have, from their beginnings, resisted the flattening of lived experience into data points.

They, too, constitute part of our disciplinary heritage, even if these critical, interpretive, and expansive perspectives have often found themselves overshadowed by hegemonic trends in research and practice.

Yet even as we speak of this “disenchantment,” it is worth noting that the forces behind it are not merely epistemological but also material and political. The historical development of psychology is inextricably linked to broader political-economic shifts, including capitalist pressures toward commodification, neoliberal logics of self-optimization, and institutional demands for quantifiable outcomes. These structural conditions often reinforce the mechanistic metaphors we use to describe mind and behavior. If we are to reimagine psychology, we must also grapple with the ways that late capitalism and market-oriented funding priorities shape what counts as legitimate research and whose experiences are deemed worthy of attention.

And so we find ourselves here, in an age where the predictive model has become the governing metaphor for reality itself, where the human person is increasingly conceptualized as a bundle of data points, and where psychology—the very discipline that ought to serve as a bulwark against the mechanization of consciousness—has instead made itself a willing instrument of that mechanization.

This brings us, inevitably, to the crisis of our present age—a crisis that is not, at its core, political or economic or technological, but epistemic. It is a crisis of disconnection and estrangement. Not simply the loneliness of fewer bowling leagues, but the loneliness produced by a way of knowing that severs in order to understand, that isolates in order to explain. This is the loneliness of the autonomous individual, constructed through centuries of epistemological violence: a knower imagined apart from what is known, a self extracted from relation, a mind divorced from body, history, and earth.

But what if this conceptualization of reality is not merely incomplete, but deeply misguided? What if, in its obsession with what can be systematized, psychology has failed to grasp the nature of consciousness itself? And what if the categories that modern psychology has relegated to the margins—the mystical, the mad, the poetic—are not threats to our understanding, but portals to a fuller, richer, more truthful vision of the human condition?

Madness: A Breach in the Order of Things

Traditionally, madness has functioned as a boundary marker, the dividing line between the rational and the irrational, the sane and the pathological. The mad are those whose experience does not conform to the established order, whose perception of reality disrupts the shared consensus. And so, psychology has taken it upon itself to bring the mad back into alignment, to restore order where there is rupture. But history suggests that these ruptures are not merely failures of cognition, as madness exposes the cracks in our epistemic foundations. It disrupts the illusion that reality is as fixed, as stable, as law-bound as we would like to believe.

To say this is not to romanticize suffering or overlook the material realities of psychiatric oppression. The coercive power of mental health institutions—and the legacies of colonialism, racism, and classism embedded within them—continues to shape the experiences of those who are

labeled “mad.” Yet, even within these often-traumatizing contexts, forms of madness can illuminate the points where our consensus-driven frameworks fail. We must recognize both the profound distress that calls for tangible support and the disruptive knowledge that some experiences of madness might carry. In holding these two truths together, we can begin to see madness not just as a pathology to be eradicated, but as a confrontation with the edges of what our society deems permissible to know or feel.

Mysticism: The Reality We Have Trained Ourselves to Forget

The mystical, too, has long been regarded with suspicion. In the post-Enlightenment imagination, mystical experience is either (A) a charming but largely irrelevant curiosity or (B) indistinguishable from psychosis. And yet, every civilization prior to our own recognized the mystical as a vital component of human experience.

Traditions across time and culture have insisted that the highest forms of knowing are not those that analyze reality from a detached distance, but those that participate in it directly. Even within dominant Western epistemologies, thinkers such as William James and Merleau-Ponty took this claim seriously, recognizing that the world is not merely an object of cognition but an event in which we are entangled. Feminist epistemologists have long argued that psychology’s obsession with “objectivity” has functioned less as a commitment to truth than as a strategy of power—a way of privileging detached, mechanical ways of knowing while dismissing the deeply relational as “subjective noise.” Many Indigenous traditions maintain the conviction that to know the world is not to dominate it, but to remain in relation with it.

Which is to say: It is only in our modern, disenchanted world that mysticism appears irrelevant. And if we find ourselves unmoored, existentially anxious, and increasingly alienated, perhaps it is because we have exiled from our reality the very modes of knowing that might help us navigate it.

At the same time, we should remain vigilant to the ways mystical traditions have often been co-opted or misrepresented, especially in consumer-driven or New Age contexts that reduce the “spiritual” to just another commodity.

The Psychological Humanities and the Task of Reenchantment

When we flatten our ways of knowing, we flatten our ways of being. And when we flatten our ways of being, we become brittle, fearful, and—above all—disconnected. What we cannot categorize, we cast out. What we cannot explain, we ignore or attempt to dominate. In a world that worships control, Otherness itself becomes a threat.

And the result, predictably, is a world not merely anxious, but haunted. Haunted by the knowledge that something essential has been lost, that there is a depth to things we can no longer access, that we have made ourselves into strangers not only to one another but to the very ground on which we stand. The attempt to dominate the world has left us incapable of dwelling within it.

This is why, at the end of all this, we must return to the humanities. For if psychology is to recover anything of its original vocation, it must relinquish its fixation on measurement and rediscover its capacity for interpretation. We must learn to take poetry as seriously as data, to treat metaphor as more than a rhetorical flourish, to understand that ambiguity is not a defect in human cognition but a fundamental feature of reality itself. It must, in short, abandon the impulse to disenchant and rediscover what it means to wonder.

Reenchantment should not be understood, here, as a turn away from social critique. On the contrary, it requires us to confront the structural conditions that shape how we produce knowledge and define “truth.” A reenchantment that ignores questions of justice and materiality risks becoming escapist; a reenchantment aligned with critical praxis offers the possibility of both insight and transformation.

We hope this gathering will be a place to ask these overriding questions: Will psychology continue to refine its representations while losing its subject, or revise its first commitments so that persons and worlds can appear again in their depth and claim upon us.

This conference invites proposals that engage with these themes, including (but not limited to):

- **Mad Studies & the Politics of Sanity:** What does it mean to take seriously the knowledge generated in and through experiences of madness? How might we move beyond the binary of rationality and pathology without losing sight of suffering? What does it mean to challenge psychiatry’s dominant narratives while also attending to the material and existential weight of mental distress?
- **Critical Psychology & Neoliberal Subjectivity:** How has psychology been shaped by the demands of late capitalism? What possibilities exist for resisting the psychologization of structural problems? How might we cultivate subjectivities that resist the logics of individualism, self-optimization, and commodification?
- **Indigenous Epistemologies & Ways of Knowing:** What does it mean to engage Indigenous knowledge on its own terms, rather than as a supplement to Western frameworks? How might psychology learn from traditions that refuse the split between mind and world, self and other?
- **Theology, Mysticism & the Limits of Psychological Explanation:** What happens when psychology reaches the edges of what it can explain? How do theological and mystical traditions challenge our basic assumptions about perception, selfhood, and reality? What forms of healing have been overlooked because they do not fit within dominant empirical models?
- **Historical-Cultural Critiques of Psychology:** How have shifts in historical consciousness shaped what we take to be psychological truth? What are the blind spots that our current epistemic moment renders invisible? How might attending to psychology’s history make possible new futures? In what ways have critical traditions within psychology—phenomenology, depth psychology, feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives—already anticipated alternative, more expansive understandings of mind?

- **Psychological Humanities & the Poetics of Experience:** How might the psychological humanities serve as an antidote to psychology's overcommitment to abstraction and control? What can psychology learn from literature, philosophy, or the arts? What role does metaphor play in psychological meaning-making? How might a reenchanting psychology reclaim imagination, narrative, and aesthetic attunement?
- **Clinical Implications of Reenchantment:** How might a reenchanting psychology change our approach to clinical work? What does it mean to think psychoanalytically, phenomenologically, or existentially about distress? How can clinical practice remain rigorous while also making room for the inexplicable, the symbolic, the sacred?

Because the problem is not only what we say, but also how we gather, we welcome formats that both enact and analyze the theme. In addition to papers, panels, and symposia, we invite films and documentaries, poetry readings, music and performance, collaborative art and installations, public dialogues, and workshops. We welcome experiential inquiry with the city and the body, including city as text walks and runs, reading the world 5Ks, yoga and other movement practices, and site-specific learning. Cross-genre and cross-disciplinary proposals are encouraged.

Submission deadline: December 4, 2025 (on the new moon)

Submission link:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdeRsrRXNL924RcxOf6ui0I9JU7J4LorP-6Wn3HrapcSQ9w/viewform>