




## Building on Wachtel's Points About Implications of Mitchell's Ideas: Suggestions Based on the Participatory Philosophical Perspective for Locating the Person in the World of Practical Activities


Michael A. Westerman

To cite this article: Michael A. Westerman (2017) Building on Wachtel's Points About Implications of Mitchell's Ideas: Suggestions Based on the Participatory Philosophical Perspective for Locating the Person in the World of Practical Activities, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 27:5, 530-545, DOI: [10.1080/10481885.2017.1355684](https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2017.1355684)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2017.1355684>

 Published online: 19 Sep 2017.

 [Submit your article to this journal](#) 

 Article views: 88

 [View related articles](#) 

 [View Crossmark data](#) 



# Building on Wachtel's Points About Implications of Mitchell's Ideas: Suggestions Based on the Participatory Philosophical Perspective for Locating the Person in the World of Practical Activities

Michael A. Westerman, Ph.D.

*New York University*

In his paper “The Relationality of Everyday Life,” Wachtel (this issue) successfully moves us further along the path of the “unfinished journey” (p. 509) of Mitchell’s work. I begin my comments by pointing out how Wachtel identifies the importance for both theory and practice of focusing on everyday life in addition to early parent–child interactions and what transpires in psychoanalytic/psychotherapy sessions. His points about everyday life include rejecting one-person notions of internal processes that are “frozen” in time and offering a way to understand the vicious circles that are a prominent part of most clinical problems. My comments also include suggestions about how we can take another step along the path Wachtel has encouraged us to pursue—which he aptly describes as treating the person as a “self-in-context” (p. 507)—if we approach basic issues about the person’s relationship to others and the world at large along the lines of the participatory philosophical perspective (e.g., Westerman, 2005, 2013, 2014; Westerman & Steen, 2007). That perspective takes as its cornerstone idea the view that from the outset the person is a participant in practical activities. Guided by the participatory perspective, I add to Wachtel’s suggestions about how a focus on everyday life can enter into therapeutic work; present a different view of what are typically called “inner” processes and discuss some of the implications of that view for clinical work; and, most important, put forward an alternative account of vicious circles.

In his paper “The Relationality of Everyday Life,” Wachtel (this issue) applauds Mitchell for his contributions to what Wachtel calls the “move from a frozen-residue-of-the-past view of internalized objects to a fully and robustly relational/contextual viewpoint” (p. 509). Wachtel also argues that we need to continue to pursue the implications of Mitchell’s ideas because this move remains an “unfinished journey” (p. 509). Wachtel’s goal in his paper was to explain how we can move further along on this journey by focusing on everyday life. In my opinion, he succeeds admirably.

In what follows, I first review some of Wachtel’s main points. I then turn to suggesting a way to build on those ideas to take another step along the path. I draw on philosophical considerations to rethink basic ideas about theory and metapsychology. I also refer to some relatively

recent lines of theory and research outside of the domain of psychoanalysis that illustrate the approach I suggest. I believe the basic ideas I present offer a more thoroughgoing way to focus on what Wachtel aptly refers to as the “self-in-context” (p. 507). In the final part of these comments, I show how we can put the basic ideas to work to further advance our understanding of relationship phenomena and psychotherapy processes.

### SOME OF WACHTEL'S KEY POINTS

Wachtel (this issue) points out an important theoretical inconsistency. Relational psychoanalysts view parent–infant interaction and the analytic session in terms of a two-person framework and focus on the variability, or change, of behavior that results from how people in a dyadic relationship affect each other. By contrast, they conceptualize everyday life in terms of one-person “frozen-residue-of-the-past” notions and emphasize stability in individual differences in behavior, feelings, and so forth in day-to-day living. Wachtel argues that Mitchell (1988) rejected the idea of an “inner baby fixed in time” (cited in Wachtel, this issue, p. 506) even when Mitchell tried to incorporate Kleinian and object relations theory into his thinking.

Wachtel (this issue) notes that for many years he has pursued ideas—at first independently of Mitchell and later in parallel with Mitchell’s contributions—that address concerns that are similar to the issues that motivated Mitchell’s work. However, Wachtel has given a good deal of consideration to everyday life, which he refers to as the “excluded middle” because relational theorists have paid little attention to the everyday events that take place between infancy and the time when an adult might later enter analysis or therapy (p. 511).

The account Wachtel has developed about what transpires in the relationship events of everyday life (which also is relevant for analysis and therapy) offers a single model for understanding both stability and variability. According to Wachtel, *two-person* processes can lead to *stability* in some situations, even though they lead to variability in others. In fact, Wachtel argues that early childhood events are carried forward into adulthood only insofar as *two-person* processes make that possible. We should set aside notions about “frozen” processes when it comes to everyday life, just as relational theorists do when it comes to infancy and the analytic session.

I can very briefly summarize part of Wachtel’s two-person account of stability as follows: What a person is like is not fixed in time. It must be refashioned along the same lines again and again through ongoing relational processes if the person is going to remain the same. This occurs when the person behaves in a manner that leads significant others to respond to him or her in ways that promote staying the same. Wachtel’s model also includes an explanation for why individuals behave in ways that lead to self-perpetuating “vicious and virtuous circles” (p. 520). I have more to say about that part of the model shortly.

Wachtel’s ideas about everyday life offer the theoretical consistency of a two-person model that accounts for both stability and variability in everyday life, infancy, and analysis/therapy. This is a very valuable contribution in itself. Moreover, Wachtel argues convincingly that paying close attention to patients’ everyday lives also can contribute significantly to clinical work. One point Wachtel makes along these lines is that we need to consider patients’ everyday lives because they are “a critical part of the ‘glue’ that holds together the link between the past and the present” (p. 519). Wachtel makes another point in his case example about Jason, which is that

coming to understand what goes on in a patient's everyday life can enhance a therapist's ability to negotiate difficult aspects of his or her relationship with the patient. Wachtel also makes an important general point about the value of attending to patients' everyday lives. He notes that in order "to help the person to generate *change* in his or her life, we need to understand with great clarity *how he or she keeps it the same*" (pp. 519–520, italics in original).

I agree with all of these ideas. In fact, Wachtel's (e.g., 1994, 1997, 2008, 2010) work has been an important influence on my approach to theorizing, research, and clinical work. Nevertheless, I have questions about a part of Wachtel's account I have not mentioned so far. According to his viewpoint, relational processes involve bidirectional causal processes between internal structures and external events. There is no beginning point in these processes because they are circular, but in one step "the callings of the inner world" (p. 519) affect how a person behaves. In another step, the individual's behavior, in turn, affects how other people respond to him or her. And in another step, "everyday life experiences shape the internal object world" (p. 518). Putting all of this together, "internal structures shape relational events as relational events shape internal structures in a never-ending bidirectional process in which neither is more fundamental" (p. 510).

From a clinical perspective, it is especially noteworthy that circular processes of this kind can take the form of vicious circles that maintain patients' problems. According to Wachtel, in such cases a patient's inner world will include problematic fantasies, expectations, conflicts, and so forth that lead to behaving in dysfunctional ways that promote responses by others that lead to the persistence of the problematic inner fantasies, expectations, and conflicts. All of these steps contribute to the perpetuation of the circle. As Wachtel puts it, the problem situation has stability "not because of either external or internal factors alone but because of how each replicates and brings forth the other" (p. 507).

I believe Wachtel's suggestion that we need to focus on the "self-in-context" is exactly on the mark (p. 507). I think most relational psychoanalysts also would agree with this point. As I see it, Wachtel's considerable contributions to our understanding of psychological problems and therapy/analysis rest on how he has made important headway in grappling with this basic notion. Specifically, his ideas are based on placing the person in the context of ongoing give-and-take with other people and placing the inner world in the context of ongoing give-and-take with external events rather than viewing it as a frozen realm.

Nevertheless, I believe that we can take the "self-in-context" notion further. To do that, we have to revisit old questions about the person's relationship to other people and the world at large and decisively depart from the dualist notion of a subject on one side of a split or divide and the world on the other. That is to say, we need a philosophical perspective that departs from the dominant viewpoints in our intellectual tradition that guide most work in psychology.

Although Wachtel maintains that internal structures take part in continual reciprocal causal relationships with external factors, he does not otherwise provide us with a new view of the nature of expectations, conflicts, unconscious processes, and so forth on the side of the person nor a new way of conceptualizing behavior and events on the side of the world. As I see it, this leaves us with a viewpoint that includes self *and* context and transactions between the two rather than a thoroughgoing model of "self-in-context." I believe that going further with the "self-in-context" idea can provide the basis for a better understanding of relationship processes, including continuity and change and other aspects of relational phenomena as well.

## RETHINKING THINGS FUNDAMENTALLY: THE PARTICIPATORY PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Several philosophers, including Merleau-Ponty (1962), Wittgenstein (1958), Heidegger (1962), and the American pragmatists, especially Dewey (1896), have marked out a fundamental viewpoint that can help us understand “self-in-context.” I have drawn on these philosophers to develop a position I call the participatory philosophical perspective (e.g., Westerman, 2005, 2013, 2014; Westerman & Steen, 2007). Whereas traditional philosophical viewpoints start with the notion that the subject, or person, is separate from the external world and reflects on it as a spectator (see Toulmin, 1982), the participatory philosophical perspective takes as its starting point the person always already involved as a participant in the world of practical activities. Practices—the person, or several people, doing things—are treated as the fundamental unit of analysis, not the person as a removed subject or particular aspects of the subject (e.g., cognitions, perceptions) and also not the world “out there” or particular behaviors, events, or objects.

### Key Points

#### *Practical Activity, What?*

The term “practical activity” refers to the vast array of things we do. Practices include fixing a flat tire and building a house, as well as other action patterns that are not utilitarian, such as gazing with awe at the stars. The things we do in interpersonal relationships also are practices, for example, greeting someone, hanging out with friends, acting independently in a relationship, and nurturing someone.

Practices are interrelated in many complex ways. One point here is that very often people engage in several practices at once. For example, someone might be building a house (in a remote setting) and at the very same time that person could be creating a new way of life focused on communing with nature.

#### *The Basic Nature of Practices*

Although my references to “doing things” might suggest that practices are behavioral and mechanical in nature, that is not the case at all. As Wittgenstein (1958) put it, practices (he used the term “forms of life”) are characterized by richly complex “regularities.” They are *meaningful* action patterns that cannot be reduced to a meaning-free object language. Moreover, what happens as people engage in practical activity matters to them (see the notion of “concern” in Heidegger, 1962).

At the same time, practices do not have the nature of Mind. Practices are meaningful, but they are not abstract formal structures, conventions, rules, or scripts. They are concrete in nature—irreducibly indexical phenomena that are embedded in the contexts of actual situations. The practices we engage in are meaningful themselves, not because they refer to meanings in people’s minds that “lie behind” the things they do. People participate in meanings; they do not possess them as removed knowers (as both rationalism and social constructionism maintain).

### *Much More than the Dyad*

Wachtel argues in his paper on relationality in everyday life and elsewhere (e.g., 2008, 2010) that relational psychoanalysis should take customs and traditions into account. I agree. In fact, there is much more to practical activity than the practices related to interpersonal relationships. Our accounts should include customs and the like and also concrete “things” and events, such as trees and rocks, cars driving down highways, and the human body. *All* practices are social and “factic” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), that is, concrete. We do things as members of some culture (that has developed ways of doing things over long spans of time) and members of a species (that has evolved ways of doing things—including changes in anatomy and physiology—over extremely long time spans).

One implication of this point about going beyond the dyad is that, in good measure, we are participants in a world of practices that we *share* with sometimes all (practices closely linked to the human body), sometimes many (practices closely linked to customs) other people. The way in which any given person will do things in any given situation is never fully unique.

Another implication is that the dyad is not the founding term and “self-in-context” does not simply refer to placing the individual within a dyad (again, as Wachtel recognizes). To understand relationships, we have to situate what takes place within a dyad in the larger world of social-factic practices. Two-person phenomena exist, but they are set within that larger framework. Also, although novel events constantly occur in relationships (because as people engage with one another, things come up that are different in all sorts of concrete ways from situations encountered before), nothing occurs *de novo*. Nothing that transpires in any given dyadic relationship is ever the starting point. Dyadic relationship events always are set within the intertwined histories of the species and any given culture. That larger context always already includes practices for interpersonal relationships.

### *Cognitions, Behaviors, and So On Are Parts of Practices*

Typically, psychologists’ accounts start with supposedly isolable elements—some on the side of Mind (perceptions, cognitions, feelings, unconscious processes), some on the side of the “world out there” (behaviors, events)—and then go on to put those building blocks together to explain what people do. We see this, for example, in the familiar mediational model according to which events lead to perceptions, which are then processed internally, which then leads a person to respond with some behavior. According to the participatory perspective, this approach puts the cart before the horse. We should start by recognizing what people are doing. Only then will we be in a position to understand the cognitions, behaviors, and so forth that are involved, because those supposed building blocks actually are *parts of* practices.

Two developmental psychologists—Kaye (1985) and Fogel (1993)—put forward an idea that is helpful for understanding this point. They maintained that perceptions, behaviors, and so on, are *incomplete* in themselves and that, therefore, (a) the significance they have in any given situation depends on the role they play in the practice of which they are a part, and (b) they must *dovetail* (Kaye, 1985), that is, coordinate, with the other parts of what is taking place to forge practical activity. For example, what transpires in a relationship is not made up of a string of isolable behaviors. Instead, any individual behavior that occurs as two people relate to one another is a contribution by one of the participants to doing something with the other person that

has to mesh with what is taking place with respect to that practice (Westerman, 2005). Our primary focus should be on *meaningful, organized action patterns* that are forged by dovetailing.

### *Reconceptualizing "External Factors"*

According to the participatory perspective, things (trees, rocks, cars, etc.) are parts of practices too, not isolable entities that have a certain nature in themselves (as in Kant's *in itself*). This idea is very similar to Gibson's (e.g., 1986) concept of affordances and Dewey's (1896) point that a stimulus is never an independent event but always something we perceive as part of what we are already doing.

However, this is not to say that the nature of rocks, trees, and so forth is "up to us." The things in the world also are not Kant's *for itself*. Recall the point I made earlier about how we do not possess meanings, we participate in them. Because we are always already engaged in participating in the world of practices, things have significances for us that we have not created. Rather, we find ourselves already engaged with those things in certain ways.

### *Reconceptualizing the "Inner World"*

Typically, psychologists think of the "inner world" of perceptions, cognitions, the subjective experience of feelings, and so on in a manner that largely focuses on representations viewed as copies of things "out there" in the world or imagined to be the case. The unconscious (fantasies, etc. that are not accessible to awareness) is viewed in a similar way, with the proviso that it includes representations that are hidden. Even when most psychologists think about internal *processes*, they view them as explicit rules or schema that are representations too, albeit ones that we do not "see" in awareness. As I said earlier, all of these phenomena are viewed as independent building blocks that we have to put together with other building blocks (e.g., behaviors) to arrive at accounts of what people do.

According to the participatory perspective, we primarily should be concerned with *what Mind does, not with the contents it contains*. Nevertheless, our accounts should include something like the contents that play the central role in most approaches. People can represent things in the Mind's eye. For example, a dancer can think to him- or herself "hit that mark" and visualize landing on a certain spot on the stage at the end of a leap. However, representing things is not the main thing that goes on in perception or cognition by any means, and we represent things only sometimes. Moreover, the contents of Mind should be treated as *parts of practical activity*, not isolable elements that enter into transactions with other building blocks.

In a discussion about rules, Wittgenstein (1958, § 85) offered a simple example that clarifies these ideas. He imagined coming upon a signpost depicting an arrow as he is taking a journey and asked, "But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?" The point is that the signpost itself does not include all we need to know to make use of it. Merleau-Ponty (1962) referred to what else we need to know as "prereflective understanding," or practical know-how. This basic kind of understanding is *not* a more elaborated set of additional explicit cognitions that simply remain out of awareness. It cannot be made explicit because it is not theoretical in nature but rather irreducibly linked to concrete contexts. The signpost on the road and the dancer's visualizing a spot on the stage might both play very useful roles, but these contents are useful only insofar as prereflective

understanding enables a person to dovetail them with other features of an actual concrete situation (e.g., another dancer crossing one's path at a certain distance at a certain moment) in a manner that makes it possible to attain the goal.

Without doubt, our practices are vastly different and far richer than what they would be if they did not include complex cognitions, differentiated and complex feelings, and unconscious processes. Nevertheless, these contents and processes are nested within the action patterns we participate in. The "inner realm" is not the separate domain of the isolable self but part of the world of practical activities in which the "self-in-context" is engaged.

It is indeed a shift to depart from the idea of the person as spectator who has cognitions and feelings *about* situations to the notion that the person is a participant who thinks and feels *in* situations. Nevertheless, the participatory perspective does not offer an impoverished view of this part of the landscape. It provides the basis for understanding people in ways that are every bit as deep and richly meaningful as traditional conceptualizations of the inner world.

### *Related Lines of Theory and Research*

Several recent lines of theory and research illustrate how we can study the "self-in-context" in ways that conform to the participatory perspective and suggest its promise. One example is a set of efforts in cognitive science often called 4 E Cognition (see Osbeck, 2009). The Es stand for the claims that cognition is "enacted" (not primarily a matter of representation), "embodied," "extended" (i.e., the claim that Mind even goes beyond the body to include, e.g., the pen and paper one writes with), and "embedded" (situated in concrete contexts).

Another example is the functionalist approach to emotion (e.g., Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990; also see Westerman & Steen, 2007, p. 334), which treats emotion as organized action patterns and places the subjective experience of feelings in the context of those patterns. One other example includes Vygotsky's (1978) activity theory and related research on scaffolding in cognitive and language development (e.g., Fogel, 1993; Hustedt & Raver, 2002), which provides helpful illustrations of dovetailing, or coordination, in interaction as a caretaker and child engage in doing something with one another.

Other examples include Gibson's (e.g., 1986) work on affordances, which I mentioned earlier; Bickhard's (2009) interactivism, which among other things treats brain processes as parts of how people do things; position exchange theory (Martin, 2012; Martin & Gillespie, 2010), which views social roles from a perspective based on G. H. Mead; and work I have been pursuing with colleagues on interpersonal defense theory, to which I return at a later point (e.g., Westerman & de Roten, 2017; Westerman & Muran, 2017; Westerman & Steen, 2007).

## PUTTING THESE IDEAS TO WORK

We can take these basic ideas of the participatory perspective and put them to work to enhance understanding of relationship phenomena and psychotherapy processes. With respect to relationships, the ideas lead to novel ways of thinking about continuity and change and about how one person's behavior affects another person.



## Staying the "Same"

To begin, I consider one kind of situation in which two people, A and B, are in a relationship and the ways both A and B are acting remain the "same," that is, they each engage in some particular practice for relating to the other and continue to do so. This is a simpler phenomenon than the type of situation Wachtel explains in terms of vicious circles. It also is less important from a clinical standpoint. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider here. I turn to the kind of example Wachtel focuses on at a later point.

For example, consider a situation in which A is acting in a negative, hostile controlling manner. As I see it, it always is possible that A can continue to act the "same" way in this relationship no matter how B responds *so long as A dovetails each of his or her individual contributions to the exchange with B's contributions in certain ways* (see Westerman, 2013, pp. 366–368). Consider a case in which B responds to A by opposing A's attempts at control. If, at one point, B argues that a directive by A is not a good idea, A might dismiss B's points and amplify his or her demands. If, at another point, B voices objection in general to A calling the shots, A might reply with a put down about B's character. These behaviors are different from each other in one sense, whereas in another they are the same because both are hostile controlling ways of relating to another person. Similarly, A can continue to act the same way if B defers to A and goes along with him or her, or if B behaves in an independent, autonomous manner, or if B acts in an easygoing, communing way so long as, once again, A dovetails each of his or her bids with B's bids in certain ways.

In all these cases, A could act in a hostile controlling manner, although "staying the same" over time would require *constantly changing* how he or she acts in order to modulate his or her bids based on B's moment-to-moment contributions. This point also holds regarding what B has to do to continue to engage in the practices of opposing A's attempts at control, or yielding submissively, or acting independently, or communing with A.

We could say that these examples involve "two-person processes" in the sense that we cannot think about what one person is doing without taking into account what the other person is doing. However, relational psychoanalysts use this term to refer to situations in which what transpires in a dyad leads to changes of a different sort, for example, A and B creating some new way of relating to each other in which both A and B change how they are acting. From the standpoint of relational psychoanalysis, one might well ask, "Shouldn't there be mutual influence within the A-B dyad that goes beyond modulating behavior to stay the same?"

By contrast, the participatory perspective can readily make sense of this type of example. In fact, examples of this sort highlight several ideas basic to the approach. They illustrate the points that we should focus on meaningful, organized action *patterns*, not on isolable behaviors, cognitions, feelings, and so forth, and that these patterns are forged by processes of *dovetailing*, or coordination, with whatever else is occurring such that these *parts* have to vary from one moment to the next to result in the same pattern.

The absence of mutual influence leading to changes in action patterns themselves in this kind of example can be explained by another point I have presented (in agreement with Wachtel): The dyad takes its place in the much larger world of practical activity. Both A and B may well have developed how they relate to the other outside of their own dyadic relationship, and factors outside of their relationship may maintain how they act in this dyad.

Hence, we have a case of stability in individuals' ways of relating rather than a situation in which bidirectional causal processes lead both participants to change in noteworthy ways. *However*, these stable aspects of how each person acts are features of the "self-in-context," not the self as separate—with "context" referring to the world of practices, not only the context of this one dyadic relationship, and "how a person acts" understood as a way of participating in a pattern of practical activity that is embedded in concrete contexts.

### Changing Relationship Practices

Along with Wachtel, I believe that transactions between people often cause people to change their relationship practices. But how do these change processes work?

We can explain these processes as examples of *scaffolding*, which I mentioned briefly earlier, and the similar notion *entrainment* (e.g., Bernieri, Reznick, & Rosenthal, 1988; Brazelton & Als, 1979). These concepts refer to phenomena in which one person, X, relates to another person, Y, in a patterned manner that "pulls" Y into a new way of relating to X by building on certain aspects of Y's initial way of relating to X.

I can illustrate this idea with an example. Person Y may have been relating to X in a way that never included asking X for any kind of help or assistance and never accepting any help that X offered spontaneously. X might be able to lead Y to change by offering simple expressions of concern when Y made any reference at all to the things that were difficult in Y's life. If at some later point Y began to respond to X's expressions of concern (e.g., by saying, "Yeah, you're right, that really was tough."), X might go on to offer advice on such occasions or do simple things to cheer up Y. Over time, Y might begin to ask X for help and accept X's assistance.

Understanding changes in relationship practices in terms of scaffolding or entrainment follows quite directly from the participatory perspective because that perspective leads us to recognize (a) that what changes is a meaningful pattern of activity, not specific isolable behaviors, cognitions, or unconscious processes; (b) that change involves a shift to a different meaningful action pattern; and (c) that promoting change in one person's action pattern requires that the other person dovetail his or her contributions to the relationship in a particular way with the first person's initial way of doing things.

The participatory perspective also provides a basis for understanding other features of scaffolding/entrainment because it locates the person in the world of practical activities, not just the context of a given dyadic relationship. A person promoting change via scaffolding will do so in ways that draw on prereflective understanding of how he or she might help the other person change. In my example, X would draw on prior practical familiarity with Y's initial pattern of avoiding help, what it would be like for Y to engage in their relationship in a way that included appreciating assistance, and, probably, how to help someone change. This prereflective understanding would originate in X's prior experiences outside of his or her relationship with Y.

Similarly, the person who changes (Y in the example) contributes to the relationship at the outset by engaging in some practice for relating to others that originated outside of and prior to the relationship in question. Also, his or her response to the other person's scaffolding typically will be supported by some prereflective understanding of the new way of relating. For example, Y probably had at least some previous positive experiences with other relationships in which he or she did ask for help.

## Vicious Circles

I now turn to relationship phenomena characterized by the vicious circles Wachtel focuses on. As I noted earlier, I agree with Wachtel that these problematic processes occur when a person behaves in ways that lead other people to respond in a manner that makes it likely that the person will continue to act toward them in the same way. I also agree with Wachtel that vicious circles are very important clinically because, as I quoted earlier, in order “to help the person to generate *change* in his or her life, we need to understand with great clarity *how he or she keeps it the same*” (pp. 519–520, italics in the original). In addition, I agree with him that exploring a patient’s everyday life can help an analyst or therapist understand the vicious circles that occur in the transference.

Nevertheless, I also believe that there is more to learn about vicious circles. For example, as I see it, there is more to learn about *how* individuals relate to other people that leads others to become “unwitting ‘accomplices,’” as Wachtel would say (pp. 519 and 520). That is, what is problematic behavior like that results in a vicious circle?

### *Interpersonal Defense Theory*

In part guided by Wachtel’s ideas about vicious circles, along with several colleagues I have developed a theory about what I call “interpersonal defenses” (e.g., Westerman, 2005; Westerman & de Roten, 2017; Westerman & Muran, 2017; Westerman & Steen, 2007) and pursued a program of research on the theory (for a brief review, see Westerman & de Roten, 2017, p. 15). I offer a short summary of the theory here. It offers a substantive account of vicious circles that differs from Wachtel’s ideas in a number of respects. These differences result from that fact that interpersonal defense theory is based on the participatory perspective.

Whereas psychoanalytic theory views defenses as intrapsychic processes (the ego mechanisms of defense) that modulate internal experiences of anxiety, guilt, and self-esteem, interpersonal defense theory focuses on *what people are doing* in their relationships and goes on to conceptualize defenses primarily as interpersonal action patterns that attempt to influence what transpires in those relationships. These patterns are supported by cognitive and emotional processes as well as processes for keeping certain things out of awareness. Those “inner” processes enter into the model in a different and more secondary way than in Wachtel’s viewpoint because they are treated as nested subprocesses that are parts of the practices in which the person is engaged.

People employ interpersonal defenses to negotiate conflicts of a particular kind. An individual might want to engage in a desired, or wished-for, relationship with another person in which the individual acts a certain way (call this X) and the other person responds in a particular manner. However, given what Wittgenstein (1958) might have called the “grammar” of interpersonal interactions, pursuing a wished-for relationship opens up other possibilities. Those possibilities may include a highly feared situation in which the individual acts in manner X and the other person responds in a way the individual dreads. Note that as conceptualized by interpersonal defense theory, having an interpersonal wish or fear does not refer to mental states or drives but rather to meaningful action patterns.

As I commented earlier, relationships between practices can be complicated. Interpersonal defenses involve engaging in two ultimately incompatible practices at the same time. To negotiate

conflicts of the kind I just described, an individual might relate to others in a manner that attempts to *both* pursue the wished-for relationship *and* act in ways aimed at avoiding the feared relationship, even though the feared outcome is a possible consequence of pursuing the wish. Parts of these defensive interpersonal patterns pursue the wished-for kind of relationship, whereas other parts attempt to “cancel out” how doing so opens up the possibility that the relationship will proceed in the way the person fears, and *these parts do not mesh with one another*. In other words, interpersonal defenses are characterized by recurring failures of dovetailing, or coordination. Although I would need more information about the case Wachtel described in his paper to be sure about this, Jason’s pattern of being sociable and walling off dialogue with others might be an example of a defensive, noncoordinating pattern.

Interpersonal defenses *attempt* to both pursue relationship wishes and avoid relationship fears, but we also need to consider how they actually affect what transpires in relationships. According to interpersonal defense theory, they “work” in the sense that they do avert feared outcomes. This contrasts with Wachtel’s account of vicious circles and, more generally, with the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, although the ways in which defensive patterns “cancel out” how pursuing wishes typically opens up the possibility of the feared consequence, it is not as if the ways in which the person pursues his or her wished-for relationship never happened. The overall package of both pursuing wishes and trying to cancel that out itself has consequences. Interpersonal defenses actually make it very unlikely that the wished-for relationship will occur. In addition, they promote negative relationship outcomes that are distinct from the person’s central fear and positive outcomes distinct from the individual’s wish.

Interpersonal defenses lead to these effects by scaffolding, or entraining, the other person’s interpersonal behavior. Their “pull”—how the other person is likely to respond when someone recurrently breaches coordination by pursuing a wish and trying to cancel that out—is due to that other person’s prereflective understanding of relationship practices, which derives from that individual’s prior participation in the world of practices at large.

According to interpersonal defense theory, the ways the other person is likely to respond, in turn, serve to maintain the interpersonal pattern of the person who is acting defensively. Hence, the upshot is a vicious circle, although a circle that differs in many respects from Wachtel’s account. The likely responses to a defensive pattern function as scaffolding that maintains the pattern because (a) the other person does not behave in the feared manner, even though the first person pursues his or her wish (albeit in a defensive manner); (b) the positive responses distinct from the first person’s wish support his or her continuation of the defensive pattern; (c) the first person can continue to *try* to pursue the wish by acting defensively, even though the pattern does not actually lead to realizing the wish; and (d) although interpersonal defenses promote negative outcomes distinct from the fear, those relationship events are less salient for the first person than his or her central fear.

Therapists become “unwitting accomplices” in a vicious circle when they respond to patients’ interpersonal defenses in the ways defensive patterns tend to elicit. Responding in those ways works against successful treatment. By contrast, I believe that therapists can promote positive outcomes when they respond to their patients in ways that realize patients’ wishes for the therapeutic relationship and when they encourage patients to pursue their relationship wishes in a straightforward manner (see Westerman & de Roten, 2017). Responding in these ways provides corrective emotional experiences that serve as scaffolding for patients to develop new ways of engaging in relationships.

I can offer a brief clinical example to illustrate many of these points about interpersonal defense theory (for a detailed analysis of the case, see Westerman & Muran, 2017). The case involved the short-term dynamically oriented treatment of a 28-year-old female patient I call Sharon (pseudonym). The therapist was a male psychiatrist with extensive experience in brief dynamic therapy. Sharon entered therapy because she was experiencing “guilt and agony” about a broken engagement and problems moving forward in her life since she ended the engagement.

Sharon related to her therapist and to significant others in a manner marked by a noncoordinating pattern in which she persistently, stubbornly pressed on with her point of view and tried to get exchanges to proceed along the lines she wanted to pursue, while she also repeatedly appeared to agree with and defer to the other person. She provoked and baited her therapist and other people by appearing to go along and then repeatedly moving away from going along to go back to pressing on with her point of view. In addition, she did not clearly present where she stood.

Evidence of several kinds indicated that Sharon was struggling with a conflict. She wished that she could act in an independent manner in relationships, including having her own point of view, and that others would respond by affirming her and showing appreciation for her, but she feared that if she pursued her wish by acting independently, others would ignore and neglect her. Her noncoordinating pattern was an attempt to negotiate this conflict. On one hand, she pursued her wish by persistently pressing on with her point of view. On the other hand, appearing to agree with and defer to others again and again worked to avoid her fear. It did this in two ways. For one thing, it repeatedly derailed acting independently and taking a stand. Truly acting independently requires behaving in certain ways *over time*—dovetailing any single comment with subsequent efforts to develop, clarify, reassert one’s position, and so forth, not simply making isolated statements. Hence, Sharon’s therapist and others could not neglect her when she acted independently because she never fully behaved in that manner. Her pattern also worked against being ignored because by repeatedly apparently deferring to the therapist and others, Sharon baited them to continue to try to engage her.

In fact, it was quite clear from videotapes of sessions that the therapist did not ignore Sharon at all. Hence, she avoided her fear. In addition, however, the therapist did not behave in a way that realized her wish. This is unfortunate, but not surprising, because by repeatedly derailing her own bids to take a stand by deferring to the therapist, Sharon made it very difficult for the therapist to know what her independent viewpoint was and, therefore, very difficult for him to affirm it. Instead, the therapist’s behavior was characterized by (a) acting at times in a benevolently managing way, trying to *help her* to be more responsive to his point of view (positive responses distinct from the wish), and (b) relating to her at other times in hostile controlling and attacking ways, trying to *get her* to be more responsive to him (negative responses distinct from fear). Both of these aspects of the therapist’s behavior were responses to the fact that Sharon’s overall pattern of defensive behavior led him to treat her as someone who was difficult to relate to.

Careful analysis of transcripts of sessions from this case by Westerman and Muran (2017) supported the view that by behaving in the way just described, the therapist contributed to maintaining Sharon’s defensive pattern and, therefore, contributed to maintaining the overall vicious circle. In fact, Sharon’s and her therapist’s ways of relating to each other remained unchanged throughout the therapy. It is not surprising that the outcome was poor.

### Working With the “Inner Realm”

What about the “inner realm” of patients’ perceptions, thoughts, feelings, unconscious fantasies, and so forth? Here, I do not believe that my position differs greatly from how Wachtel proceeds in his clinical work, for example, in his work with Jason. However, the participatory perspective offers its own way of conceptualizing how to work with so-called internal processes that highlights certain points.

By all means, analysts and therapists should try to understand their patients’ perceptions, feelings, and so on. In most cases, they should also engage with their patients in a joint process of reflecting on these things. This follows from the participatory perspective, because cognitions, feelings, and unconscious processes are viewed as parts—important parts—of how patients participate in doing things. But this idea makes a difference in *how* we should work with “inner” processes, because as *parts* of practices we should focus on them in terms of the roles they play in action patterns. For example, instead of only asking how intrapsychic defense mechanisms modulate “internal” experiences of anxiety or guilt, we should also consider—and, indeed, give more consideration to—how, for example, the particular way a patient uses denial in certain situations supports his or her ways of relating to significant others (see Westerman & Steen, 2007, pp. 342–344).

Another point is that as parts of how people do things, “inner” processes are indexical phenomena that are irreducibly situated in concrete contexts. In other words, “internal” processes are located *in* the world of practical activity. They do not reside in some separate, “internal” realm. One implication of this point is that discussions between patients and therapists regarding the patient’s feelings, thoughts, and so on are most likely to be helpful if they lead to new ways of thinking *in* situations rather than *about* situations. Without doubt, sometimes, more general, abstract, “top down” discussions can be very useful. Nevertheless, fundamentally, all thinking is part of how we engage in situations. “Top down” exchanges are helpful if and when they somehow serve to make links to doing things in actual, specific contexts.

Note, in particular, that the fact that a patient and therapist are discussing how the patient (and possibly the therapist as well) feels *about their relationship* may *not* guarantee that the exchange actually serves to place things in context, notwithstanding the focus on their relationship. Working through the transference successfully requires efforts that are enacted and concrete, even if they are at the same time reflective and aimed at insight.

### Extending Change to Everyday Life

To return to Wachtel’s theme about everyday life, I would like to underscore a point that, I think, remains mostly implicit in his example of Jason’s case. One reason for focusing on everyday life in therapy is that doing so can play a crucial role in extending changes patients are making in the therapy context—whether as the result of corrective emotional experiences, developing insight by working through the transference, or in any other way—to the rest of their lives. People sometimes spontaneously extend changes they have made in one context to others, but patients in therapy usually need help building bridges between the work that is occurring in the therapy context and their daily lives. This point follows from the indexical nature of practices.

In addition, extending changes made in therapy to other situations often involves challenges that are quite different from those faced in the therapy relationship. It is at least frequently the case that therapists will be ready to relate to their patients in new ways as patients change, but this may not be

true about a patient's other relationships. Patients often find that significant others are not ready to join them in a new "virtuous" (Wachtel, this issue, p. 520) circle. In such situations, a therapist who includes a focus on everyday life in his or her work can help a patient (in any of a number of ways—not necessarily via anything like psychoeducational teaching) explore the possibility of scaffolding/entraining how the other person relates to him or her (as in the preceding section "Changing Relationship Practices"). To be sure, efforts along these lines sometimes are not successful. At such points, a therapist might turn to helping a patient maintain his or her new way of relating in the patient's relationship with the significant other, even though that other person continues to behave in a way the patient does not like (as in the preceding section "Staying the 'Same'"). The patient's significant other may not respond in the manner the patient hoped for, but it can still be a real gain for the patient to engage in the relationship in the new way.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Wachtel helps us move a great deal further along the path of exploring the implications of Michell's work for understanding the "self-in-context." Among other points, Wachtel's contributions to this project include calling for a move away from a one-person perspective on everyday life when it comes to theory, arguing for a closely related shift when it comes to practice in which analysts and therapist focus much more attention on patients' daily lives, replacing the notion that internal processes are "frozen" in time with the view that the role they play depends on ongoing give-and-take with external events, and providing us with a way to understand the vicious circles that are a prominent part of most clinical problems.

I have suggested that we can take another step along the path of treating the person as a "self-in-context" if we rethink longstanding issues about the person's relationship to others and the world at large along the lines of the participatory philosophical perspective, which takes as its cornerstone idea the view that from the outset the person is a participant in practical activities. Guided by the participatory perspective, I have offered a different view of what are typically called "inner" processes and pointed to some of the implications of that view for clinical work; made some additional suggestions about how a focus on everyday life can enter into therapeutic work; and, most important, presented an alternative account of vicious circles.

My suggestions depart from Wachtel's ideas in a number of respects. I take full responsibility for any ways in which they are off base. On the other hand, I gratefully acknowledge that if they have merit in some respects, it is in good measure because in my work over the years I have attempted to build on what I have learned from Wachtel's contributions.

### REFERENCES

- Bernieri, F. J., Reznick, J. S., & Rosenthal, R. (1988). Synchrony, pseudosynchrony, and dissynchrony: Measuring the entrainment process in mother-infant interactions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 243–253. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.54.2.243
- Bickhard, M. H. (2009). The interactivist model. *Synthese*, *166*, 547–591. doi:10.1007/s11229-008-9375-x
- Brazelton, T. B., & Als, H. (1979). Four early stages in the development of mother-infant interaction. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, *34*, 349–369.
- Dewey, J. (1896). The reflex arc concept in psychology. *Psychological Review*, *3*, 357–370. doi:10.1037/h0070405

- Fischer, K. W., Shaver, P. R., & Carnochan, P. (1990). How emotions develop and how they organize development. *Cognition and Emotion, 4*, 81–127. doi:10.1080/02699939008407142
- Fogel, A. (1993). *Developing through relationships: Origins of communication, self, and culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gibson, J. J. (1986). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (M. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Hustedt, J. T., & Raver, C. C. (2002). Scaffolding in low-income mother-child dyads: Relations with joint attention and dyadic reciprocity. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 26*, 113–119. doi:10.1080/01650250042000636
- Kaye, K. (1985). Toward a developmental psychology of the family. In L. L'Abate (Ed.), *The handbook of family psychology and therapy* (Vol. 1, pp. 38–72). Homewood, IL: Dorsey.
- Martin, J. (2012). Coordinating with others: Outlining a pragmatic, perspectival psychology of personhood. *New Ideas in Psychology, 30*, 131–143. doi:10.1016/j.newideapsych.2009.11.007
- Martin, J., & Gillespie, A. (2010). A neo-Meadian approach to human agency: Relating the social and the psychological in the ontogenesis of perspective-coordinating persons. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science, 44*, 252–272. doi:10.1007/s12124-010-9126-7
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mitchell, S. A. (1988). *Relational concepts in psychoanalysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Osbeck, L. (2009). Transformations in cognitive science: Implications and issues posed. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 29*, 16–33. doi:10.1037/a0015454
- Toulmin, S. (1982). *The return to cosmology: Postmodern science and the theology of nature*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Vygotsky, L. A. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wachtel, P. L. (1994). Cyclical processes in psychopathology. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 103*, 51–54. doi:10.1037/0021-843X.103.1.51
- Wachtel, P. L. (1997). *Psychoanalysis, behavior therapy, and the relational world*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Wachtel, P. L. (2008). *Relational theory and the practice of psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Wachtel, P. L. (2010). One-person and two-person conceptions of attachment and their implications for psychoanalytic thought. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 91*, 561–581. doi:10.1111/j.1745-8315.2010.00265.x
- Westerman, M. A. (2005). What is interpersonal behavior? A post-Cartesian approach to problematic interpersonal patterns and psychotherapy process. *Review of General Psychology, 9*, 16–34. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.9.1.16
- Westerman, M. A. (2013). Making sense of relational processes and other psychological phenomena: The participatory perspective as a post-Cartesian alternative to Gergen's relational approach. *Review of General Psychology, 17*, 358–373. doi:10.1037/a0034447
- Westerman, M. A. (2014). Examining arguments against quantitative research: “Case studies” illustrating the challenge of finding a sound philosophical basis for a human sciences approach to psychology. *New Ideas in Psychology, 32*, 42–58. doi:10.1016/j.newideapsych.2013.08.002
- Westerman, M. A., & de Roten, Y. (2017). Investigating how interpersonal defense theory can augment understanding of alliance ruptures and resolutions: A theory-building case study. *Psychoanalytic Psychology, 34*, 13–25. doi:10.1037/pap0000122
- Westerman, M. A., & Muran, J. C. (2017). Investigating an approach to the alliance based on interpersonal defense theory. *Psychotherapy Research, 27*, 620–641. doi:10.1080/10503307.2016.1152407.
- Westerman, M. A., & Steen, E. M. (2007). Going beyond the internal–external dichotomy in clinical psychology: The theory of interpersonal defense as an example of a participatory model. *Theory & Psychology, 17*, 323–351. doi:10.1177/0959354307075048
- Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical investigations* (3rd ed.; G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). New York, NY: Macmillan.

## CONTRIBUTOR

Michael A. Westerman, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology, New York University. He also is a member of the Consulting Faculty in the Department of



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, Mount Sinai Beth Israel, New York, NY, where he is affiliated with the Psychotherapy Research Program. He maintains a part-time clinical practice as a member of the Taconic Counseling Group, Fishkill, NY. He is on the editorial boards of *Psychotherapy Research* and the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*. Two of his publications include “Going Beyond the Internal–External Dichotomy in Clinical Psychology” (with E. M. Steen, *Theory & Psychology*, 2007) and “Making Sense of Relational Processes and Other Psychological Phenomena” (*Review of General Psychology*, 2013).