

Structural Analogies Between Psychodynamic Attractor States and the Attractor Framework

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Abstract

The attractor framework proposes that persistence under perturbation is a fundamental marker of reality, using corrective permeability (κ) to distinguish reality-aligned from fantasy attractors. A recent clinical article by James Tobin (2026) describes psychological suffering as organized around recurring “attractor states”—stable patterns of emotional organization that resist insight, are embodied, and function as attempts at stability. This paper offers a post-hoc mapping between Tobin’s observations and the attractor framework. The parallels are structural analogies, not independent clinical corroboration. Both perspectives draw on a shared dynamical-systems vocabulary, and the mapping is offered as evidence of cross-disciplinary convergence rather than validation. The paper explicitly addresses the limitations of a self-published framework based on N=1 self-engineering, and specifies conditions under which the mapping would be disconfirmed.

1. Introduction: A Shared Vocabulary, Not Confirmation

The attractor framework (Galida, 2026a) is a naturalistic ontology developed independently through philosophical inquiry, systems theory, and N=1 self-engineering experiments. Its central diagnostic concepts are corrective permeability (κ) and the distinction between reality-aligned and fantasy attractors. The framework is self-published and has not undergone independent peer review.

In May 2026, clinical psychologist James Tobin published “The Psychology of ‘Attractor States’” on his professional website. Tobin draws on psychodynamic theory, attachment research, affective neuroscience, and dynamical systems theory to describe how emotional suffering becomes organized around recurring states that resist change. His article does not cite the attractor framework.

This paper identifies structural parallels between Tobin’s account and the framework. It does not claim that Tobin’s clinical observations independently corroborate the framework. Both Tobin and the framework explicitly draw on dynamical systems theory, and the shared vocabulary of “attractors,” “basins,” and “perturbation” reflects this common intellectual lineage. The mapping is a post-hoc exercise in identifying convergent themes across disciplines.

2. Tobin’s Psychodynamic Attractor States

Tobin’s article describes several features of emotional suffering that will be familiar to readers of dynamical systems literature:

2.1 Attractor States as Recurring Configurations. Tobin describes an attractor not as a single behavior or belief but as a recurring configuration toward which the emotional system gravitates—an entire organization of feeling, bodily expectation, attention, memory, and relational anticipation that emerges repeatedly under similar conditions.

2.2 Persistence Despite Insight. A central clinical puzzle for Tobin is that patients often understand their patterns intellectually, sometimes with considerable sophistication, yet the old emotional organization returns with force when certain emotional conditions arise. Insight alone rarely dislodges these deeply embedded patterns.

2.3 Embodiment and Automaticity. Tobin emphasizes that these patterns are not merely cognitive. They become woven into bodily readiness, autonomic regulation, procedural memory, emotional timing, and unconscious relational expectation—the body learns what to anticipate long before conscious reflection arrives.

2.4 Symptoms as Emotional Solutions. Tobin argues that many symptoms are not random pathology but tragic attempts at psychological stability. They persist, despite their cost, because they have served to preserve some continuity of self under conditions that once felt emotionally overwhelming.

2.5 Destabilization and the Fear of Change. When old attractors begin to loosen, patients experience a vulnerable intermediate state. They are no longer fully stabilized by the older organization, yet have not developed sufficient trust in newer ways of experiencing themselves. The temptation to retreat to the familiar attractor is strong.

2.6 The Goal of Therapy: Expanded Flexibility. Tobin's vision of psychological health is not the elimination of suffering but the gradual expansion of flexibility and reflective space within the personality—the capacity to move among emotional

states without being trapped by any one of them.

3. Structural Parallels with the Attractor Framework

3.1 Attractor States as Basins. Tobin's recurring emotional configuration toward which the system gravitates is structurally identical to the framework's concept of a basin. Both describe a stable state the system returns to automatically.

3.2 Insight Failure as Low Corrective Permeability. The framework defines a fantasy attractor as a system with low κ that resists updating. Tobin's observation—that insight alone rarely dislodges deeply embodied patterns—maps onto this. The cognitive insight is a perturbation that fails to land because the attractor is embedded in non-cognitive systems.

A note on circularity. If κ is measured by flexibility outcomes, and flexibility is what κ is claimed to predict, the mapping is circular. An operationally independent measure of κ —for example, response latency to belief-updating tasks, physiological perturbation recovery rates, or other proxies not identical with therapeutic outcome—would be required to break this circularity. No such measure has yet been validated. The current mapping relies on functional analogy, not independent measurement.

3.3 Symptoms as Stability Attempts: A Conceptual Distinction. Tobin claims symptoms persist because they *function* to maintain stability (a teleofunctional claim). The framework claims persistence under perturbation is the *mark of the real* (an ontological criterion). The two claims overlap—both describe systems that resist perturbation—but they are not identical. A symptom could

persist for functional reasons without that persistence carrying ontological significance. The mapping here is of practical convergence, not logical identity. Whether the framework's ontological claim can be grounded in or distinguished from teleofunctional accounts of persistence is a question for future theoretical work.

3.4 Destabilization as Basin Transition. The vulnerable intermediate state between old and new attractors is a phase transition between basins—a prediction the framework makes about any dissipative system under perturbation.

3.5 Therapeutic Flexibility as High Corrective Permeability. Tobin's vision of health—flexibility, the capacity to experience states without being organized by them—is high κ . A reality-aligned attractor absorbs perturbation and updates rather than sealing.

4. Independence, Shared Lineage, and the Limits of Convergence

Tobin and the framework draw on overlapping intellectual traditions. Tobin cites Lewis (2000) and Thelen & Smith (1994) from dynamical systems psychology; the framework draws on Ruelle, Prigogine, and the neuroscience of reward. The shared vocabulary (“attractor,” “basin”) reflects this common upstream source, not independent discovery.

The convergence is therefore weaker than it would be between genuinely independent methods. Both parties applied dynamical systems concepts to their respective domains. The fact that they arrived at similar structural descriptions is interesting but expected: the vocabulary constrains the output. This paper does not overinterpret that convergence.

5. Addressing the N=1 Foundation

The attractor framework was developed partly through N=1 self-engineering experiments. This methodology introduces specific risks: motivated reasoning, experimenter-subject confound, and non-transferability. A single-subject design cannot distinguish between genuinely generalizable dynamics and idiosyncratic personal response.

Disclosure of these risks is not mitigation. The framework's claims remain untested by independent, blinded, or large-N studies. The clinical parallels described here are suggestive but cannot substitute for such testing. Readers should weigh the framework's claims accordingly.

6. Falsifiability: What Would Disconfirm This Mapping?

A framework that diagnoses sealed attractors must specify its own disconfirmation conditions. For the present mapping, the following observations would weaken or invalidate the analogies drawn:

- **Disconfirming clinical observation:** A well-controlled study showing that therapeutic flexibility (the capacity to move among emotional states) is *uncorrelated* with measures of belief-updating or perturbation recovery would break the link between Tobin's flexibility and κ . Currently, no standardized instruments exist to perform this test. The condition is stated in principle; its operationalization requires measurement development beyond the scope of this paper.

- **Disconfirming dynamical finding:** Evidence that the attractor-like patterns Tobin describes are not truly self-reinforcing but are maintained entirely by external environmental contingencies, with no internal basin structure, would undermine the “basin” analogy. Distinguishing internal basin dynamics from environmental maintenance is a hard empirical problem in dynamical systems psychology, and the tools to resolve it are not yet standardized.
- **Superior alternative framework:** If a competing model explains Tobin’s clinical observations equally well *without* requiring the attractor framework’s ontological commitments, parsimony favors the simpler account. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy’s psychological flexibility model, for instance, predicts that cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance produce the rigidity Tobin describes—without appealing to attractor dynamics. Predictive processing accounts of emotional rigidity similarly provide alternative mechanisms. The present paper does not adjudicate between these rival frameworks; it offers the attractor framework as one candidate account among several.

These conditions are not met by the current paper, which offers only preliminary analogies.

7. Conclusion

James Tobin’s 2026 clinical article on psychodynamic attractor states and the attractor framework exhibit expected structural parallels, given their shared dynamical-systems heritage. Both describe recurrent, embodied patterns that resist perturbation and that therapeutic or corrective processes can gradually loosen. These parallels are analogical, not evidentiary. The

framework remains a self-published, N=1-grounded research program awaiting independent empirical testing. This mapping is a contribution to its ongoing development.

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