

The challenge of being a critical psychologist in times of crisis: An example from Austria¹

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Abstract

The article bases on the resuming papers of two workshop conferences held by GkPP (Gesellschaft kritischer Psychologen und Psychologinnen = Austrian Society of Critical Psychologists - in August 2009 and August 2010), which aimed to analyze the role and the targets of critical psychology as well as critical psychologist practitioners towards current challenges in social and health politics and practice due to globalized economic, cultural and social crises. After an overview of recent discussions in Austria's current Health and Social Politics as well as Educational Politics the paper focuses on the role of psychology/psychologists in different settings (with a focus on Health and Social System, including professional regulations if existing) and their position in relation to other health and social professionals. The following discussions include:

- the (re)development and 're-sharpening' of basic positions and attitudes of CP towards global crisis and their contributions to a critical discussion of current approaches in 'Mainstream Psychology/ies'
- well-known and new contradictions CP has to face
- feminist vs. gender debates
- what is needed in science and practical work to stay 'critical'
- the effects of crisis on the self-esteem as critical psychologists, concerning the systematically increasing number of (young, well-trained and female) colleagues in precarious jobs
- which consequences have to be drawn for a critical professionals' association concerning its concepts for profession politics

and close with an outlook to the estimated developments within the next years and suggestions for analytical and practical work to be done in critical psychology.

Keywords: Critical psychology, professional association, Austria, GkPP, science and practice, times of crisis, working conditions, critical psychological professional representation, gender

Introduction

Except for the innovative youth welfare service models of the socialist ("red") Vienna since the 1920s, scientifically founded psychological and psychotherapeutic services do not have a strong tradition in Austria. Still, based on a comprehensive obligation to social insurance² and

¹ English translation: Christina Dietscher.

² For salaried and waged employees, health, accident, retirement pension, and unemployment insurance are regulated by the General Social Insurance Act (Allgemeines Sozialversicherungsgesetz, ASVG); for the self-employed and for freelancers (including psychotherapists, clinical and health psychologists, journalists, etc.), in so far as they are not subject to specific regulations, by the Commercial Social Insurance Act (GSVG); for

financed by health insurance funds (for the healthcare sector) and by public funds of the federal countries and municipalities (for the social service sector), a nationwide health and social welfare system that can be regarded as an internationally renowned model of good practice was developed during the Second Republic (since 1955). However, with the exception of a few institutions of the health and welfare system, explicit psychological and psychotherapeutic services remained restricted to a wealthy minority due to a lack of public funding.

During the economically prosperous 1970s and 1980s, critique from several social movements of the 1960s to the 1980s (such as the children's home movement that demanded an opening of the prison-like homes for children and adolescents, the anti-psychiatry-movement that requested an opening of closed holding institutions, etc.), and the alternative models they practiced, led to comprehensive reforms of psychiatry, the penal system, and youth welfare services in Austria.

The resulting need for qualified personnel offered a variety of professional opportunities to psychologists, and thus also to critical psychologists³, and boosted the professionalization of psychology, away from a mere scientific orientation, and towards a broad field of practice-related challenges. In the early 1990s, this professionalization

1. was legalistically reflected in the legal regulation of the psychological and psychotherapeutic professions (see below), which
2. meant that psychological job profiles and corresponding positions were created in service organisations of the health and social sector alike so that
3. psychological and psychotherapeutic services became available to all parts of the population, offered by a huge variety of institutions in the context of psychosocial care.

In parallel, not least due to the social-democrat one-party government's politics of free access to university studies since the 1970s (without any restrictions on admission such as the numerus clausus in the FRG), studies of psychology became very popular. In contrast to Germany, the development of critical psychological initiatives from practice had, except for some isolated cases, no systematic effect on the discourse pertaining to the politics of science and psychology led by scientists and lecturers at Austrian universities, although critical scholars of psychology were occasionally able to involve representatives of critical psychological tendencies from Germany as visiting lecturers in the teaching at Austrian universities. These developments which are only roughly sketched here are explained in detail in Lobnig, Schuster and Trinks (1988), "Kritische Psychologie in Österreich".⁴

specific professional groups, such as civil servants, farmers, medical doctors, lawyers etc., there are diverse separate regulations.

³ Hereafter, "critical psychologists" (in German: "kritisch", written with a small letter k, refers to psychologists who are, in the broadest sense, committed to a subject-science concept of man and to a social-scientist approach towards "psychology" as a subject, independently of whether they represent a specialized systematic school of thought or rather an epistemological critical psychological approach. Examples for their social-political commitment to psychotherapy, psychiatry, the penal system, social pedagogy and to providing expertise are given in the article "Psychologie in der Praxis: Alternative Entwürfe und Kritik" ("Psychology in practice: Alternative models and critique") in the proceedings of the congress "Gegen.Teile – Gemeinsamkeiten und Differenzen einer kritischen Psychologie" ("OppoSites – Similarities and differences in critical psychology") (published under the German title by G. Benetka, G. Brandl, W. Fürnkranz, H. Lobnig, & C. Nowak, 1992).

⁴ Critical psychology in Austria.

The professional licensing, the vocational training and professional practice of psychologists in the healthcare sector (Psychologist's Act, PA, 1990) and of psychotherapy (Psychotherapy Act, PthA, 1990) have been subject to legal regulations since 1991. From an international perspective, these separated regulations are specific to Austria especially in so far as the exertion of psychotherapy is not, so as in other European countries, such as the FRG or Italy, linked to a specified professional background like psychology or medicine.

Next to the protection of the professional title "psychologist" (which is reserved to graduates of psychology), the PA stipulates a consecutive postgraduate practical and theoretical training to obtain the "qualification for an autonomous and self-employed professional practice in the healthcare sector"⁵ (art. 3, paragraph 3), which is linked to the protected professional titles "clinical psychologist" and "health psychologist". The practice training corresponds to a full-time occupation of about one year under qualified supervision in an institution of the healthcare system and is accompanied by a theoretical curriculum.

The PthA regulates the practice of psychotherapy as a self-employed profession, the admission to which is based on a number of specified professional backgrounds⁶ but can, under particular circumstances, also be granted "in case of specific personal suitability", if the latter can be specifically demonstrated. A comprehensive basic psychosocial training without presuppositions (preparatory course⁷) is followed by school-specific⁸ advanced studies in psychotherapy which are, depending on the school, either predominantly method-oriented or self experience-oriented. After completion of the professional training, the professional accreditation needs to be obtained from the Ministry of Health. Although the PthA stipulates the recognition of qualifications acquired in relation to the aforementioned professional backgrounds, these regulations are unsatisfactory for psychologists in so far as they can neither cheaper nor quicker obtain the professional accreditation than persons without any psychosocial or health-related professional background.

Despite all its shortcomings that are further explained below, the legal regulation of the two occupational profiles has resulted in an upgrading of these at least in the field of institutional psychosocial care, as well as in a further differentiation of psychological job profiles in the health and social sector (clinical and health psychologists and psychotherapists in hospitals and extramural institutions; children's, youth and family psychologists in youth welfare institutions; forensic psychologists in penal institutions and as court-appointed experts, etc.).

Outside the health and social sector, professional fields such as occupational and organisational psychology (in human resource management, in employment agencies and enterprises, especially in relation to occupational health and safety), school/educational psychology (in school psychology institutions), transportation psychology (for providing expertise on drivers' roadworthiness, for the supervision and corrective training of persons displaying behavioural problems in traffic) and sports psychologists (especially in relation to competitive and top-class sports) came up which are only partly, and if so, very differently, regulated by specific laws or governmental norms.

⁵ In German: Berechtigung zur selbständigen und eigenverantwortlichen Berufsausübung im Bereich des Gesundheitswesens.

⁶ In addition to psychology and medicine, these are a.o. backgrounds in pedagogical studies and theology (!), social work, and also non-academic nursing and health professions.

⁷ In German: Propädeutikum.

⁸ Currently, more than 20 different movements and schools are recognized by the Austrian Ministry of Health.

However, a capable and sustainable model for financing psychological and psychotherapeutic services also in the extramural sector has not been established until to date (currently, health insurance funds cover only clinical-psychological diagnostics, a small number of psychotherapeutic treatments and a very limited allowance for self-financed psychotherapy). Furthermore, there is hardly any coverage of preventative psychological services by health insurance funds.

In addition, an explicit regulation for the provision of training posts for prospective clinical and health psychologists in institutions of the healthcare sector, as well as for their employment in the social sector and related areas, has also been missing until today. The provision of such training posts is usually regarded as “voluntary” by potential training institutions, and the same “voluntariness” is also expected from (and usually provided by) the trainees since, in their own perception, there is no other chance in light of the lack of high-quality training posts and the pressure to obtain a professional accreditation in order to succeed on the labour market. Thus, young psychologists often complete an “internship” of at least one year for free or are remunerated by “pocket money” far below the subsistence level.⁹ Since 2004, trainees at least have to be covered by social insurance (to be paid by the employer).

At least since the turn of the millennium spending for psychosocial services in the health and social sector has become more and more restricted.¹⁰ The public socio-political discourse focuses on aspects such as the “financeability of the health sector”, on “interface management” (discussion about in- versus outpatient care), “privatisation” (outsourcing of health and social services to private providers, restrictive commissioning of services by underselling, a deterioration of the staff-client ratio, etc.), and “criteria of efficiency”.

Since the crisis of 2008, not only hidden but real cut-backs in the public spending for psychosocial care have become socially acceptable. With regard to content, the cost reductions concern especially youth welfare services, disabled care and nursing care; structurally, they focus especially on the outpatient sector and on subsidies for social institutions managed by private providers. These cut-backs are, albeit not explicitly, accompanied by a reduction of posts for psychologists in the concerned organisations as well as in public institutions. Although these developments do not result in a reduction of the number of psychologists working in the aforementioned areas, they are not employed as such, but in lower remuneration groups and salary classes according to collective contracts. In addition, many institutions have discovered that young psychologists, in relation to their practice training, accept to perform practically any kind of assistance and care, remunerated far below collectively regulated contracts, if their activities can anyhow be circumscribed as “psychosocial” and result in the right vocabulary being included in their certificate of practice. In the meantime, such “training posts” are unabashedly offered even by institutions that have not been accredited as training institutions.¹¹ These circumstances enable

⁹ Currently €400, before tax, minus social insurance contribution per month, for a 40-hour work week in public hospitals in Vienna. This amount is proportionally reduced in case of part-time work; it varies slightly, upwards but more often downwards, between providers and the Austrian federal countries.

¹⁰ In 2000, a government coalition between conservative-clerical (Austrian People’s Party, ÖVP) and right-wing nationalist (J. Haider’s, Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ) forces, which was re-elected in 2002, brought about a “big turn” in Austria; it was replaced by a “big coalition” (social-democrat party of Austria / SPÖ and ÖVP) only in 2006. Although this change in government slowed down the cuts in social welfare, it did not alter the general trend.

¹¹ According to Art. 8 PA, organizations offering training posts are to undergo a test procedure by the Ministry of Health prior to being included in a public list. But the Ministry does not perform any follow-up

institutions to sustain a tolerable level of service quality even under conditions of financial cut-backs; some highly specialised institutions can only survive and sustain their range of services in that way.

On the other hand, however, the need for psychosocial services is growing enormously:

- The increasing life expectancy, in combination with stagnating birth rates, brings about an ageing of society, which leads to an age-related increase in somatic, neurological and mental disorders and a rise in the related need for care. This is not only a quantitative problem, but requires also new qualitative approaches and concepts for treatment.

- Epidemiologically, mental disorders are on the rise, as is demonstrated by many statistical parameters. Mental disorders are the third-most reason for sickness absences from work, and, in comparison to somatic diseases, the duration of individual sickness leaves is considerably longer (compare Leoni, 2011). The figures for newly assigned disease-related early retirement (disability pensions) are especially noteworthy. For men, mental disorders are the second-most cause (26.3%) and for women (47.6%) the most important cause for receiving a disability pension (Leoni, 2011, p. 74). Younger persons are considerably more affected than older ones (ibid.). New approaches of (psychological) rehabilitation and, more importantly, targeted prevention at the worksite are therefore strongly needed.

- The health insurance expenses for psychopharmacological drugs that are only available by prescription are rising exponentially, while the costs for psychotherapy and other psychological types of treatment only come up to a fraction of these (however, the current (non-)regulation of health insurance coverage of these services does not allow for a systematic and coherent comparison).

In conclusion, two further developments of relevance for the current picture of the Austrian society which can be observed since the turn of the millennium are worth mentioning: First, compared to the figures of the late 20th century, the unemployment rates are systematically going up as well. This concerns especially (unskilled) adolescents, older persons and especially women (despite their generally growing employment rates). Second, in relation to the last mentioned group, the gender gap is once again explicitly widening. Sections 2B and 3 focus on this development in more detail.

Against these backgrounds, longstanding activists of the Society of Critical Psychologists¹² (GkPP) on the one side, and young and motivated members on the other, expressed interest in a forum for profound analysis and discussion outside the routines of the professional-political discourse, based on the need for a well-founded basis for their critical psychological thinking and action. Participants of two workshop meetings (which will, in the following, be referred to as “first” and “second critical psychological alp meeting” because of the chosen venue and setting of these meetings), organised in 2009 and 2010 by the GkPP under the title “Critical Psychology – Quo Vadis”, tried to systematically discuss and work out tasks and challenges for a politically and practically effective critical psychological attitude, beyond their personal concernment with everyday professional problems. The results of these discussion processes are summarised in the following chapters.

evaluation of these training posts; the list, therefore, cannot be regarded as a reliable source of information for young psychologists.

¹² In German: “Gesellschaft kritischer Psychologen und Psychologinnen.“

How can the epistemological position and the basic attitude of critical psychology be reconstructed and further developed – considering the current situation of crisis?

The introductory question postulates that there is in fact a need for the reconstruction or further development of epistemological positions. Although the real-life aftermath (unemployment, “new poverty”, reduced social networks) of the seemingly “intransparent” crisis (at least according to the media) does not leave any doubt about its victims (older people, single parents, undereducated persons, the chronically ill and the disabled, asylum seekers), the “winners” of the crisis remain strangely vague (even the financial sector, which was identified as “offender” in 2008, is by now considered as being in need of help). The new line of argumentation stresses the co-responsibility of the victims – who are considered as “beneficiaries” of health and social systems and of “too high” salaries (despite continuously growing productivity) that have been labelled as “non-financeable” – if not for the crisis itself then at least for its “solution” (only “economising” will free nation states from their debt entanglement). As a consequence, there is ostensibly an erosion of social solidarity, and even sprouting protest movements (“Occupy”, “Indignados”, etc.) remain inoffensive. While this is neither due to their analyses being unfounded in principle, nor to their lacking intellectual capacity – the majority of activists in these movements are very well educated and trained¹³ – other than in the 20th century, they usually suffer (not only individually but as whole groups) from precarity, being barred from societal inclusion. At the same time, they remain nourishing their hope for inclusion which makes their discourse corruptible (which must not be mistaken for an ethical judgment).

Now, what are the consequences of these developments for a reconstruction of the specific discourse of critical psychology? From today’s perspective, the discourses of critical psychology (psychologies) represent, historically as well as systematically, an important basis for the current analysis, but they were placed in, and conditioned by, the historically, socially and culturally limited discourse praxes of their time of origin. On the one side, they were part of the lifestyle of academic scholars and young scientists at universities as arenas for a type of intellectual and personal practice that can, today, neither be claimed nor practiced. Thus, the critical psychological movement of the late 1960s and 1970s positioned itself primarily within the universities, wherefrom it however developed its options for a broader societal realm: the change of societal conditions.

There was an eminently fruitful tension between the arenas for intellectual freedom that were provided by universities on the one side, and the out-of-university reality of conditions of power and exploitation. However, the freedom described above was systematically reduced in the following: Universities became subject to the same rules of the free market economy as any other production facility, resulting in a demand for increased efficiency, optimised resource allocation, and directly exploitable “products” (= labour force). In the end, these developments captured not only sciences of technological relevance, but also the humanities and the social sciences, so that the creeping loss of freedom also reached, and de facto blocked, the critical psychological discourse.

On the other hand, the intellectual critical social-scientist discourses came into contact with the upcoming social movements, whose concrete individual goals had one common focus, i.e. to grant equal access to societal resources and opportunities for development to so-far disadvantaged groups, and to use these resources and opportunities in a sustainable way:

¹³ Here, too, the figure of speech of reversing cause and effect seems to work: highly qualified? Yes, but unfortunately for the wrong field ...

human and civil rights movements, peace movements, women's movements, movements against total(itarian) institutions (prisons, psychiatry, asylums, the army), and ecological movements. These movements provided the grounds on which the intellectuals could test, and further develop, their theses in practice. This progressive potential was also rather willingly supported by reformist social-democrat forces, who used it for and integrated it into their reform plans, thereby making it socially acceptable;¹⁴ without, however, taking up its political radicalness. In the process, however, this potential essentially lost its vigour.

In conclusion, we are of the opinion that numerous sets of critical psychological thinking and the resulting imperatives for practice were, although taken out of the context of their epistemological lines of argumentation, thus captured and (in abridged form) adopted by "mainstream" psychology (if ONE such stream exists at all) so that numerous of the propositions that were considered valid by the discourse of the discipline some 30 years ago cannot be sustained any more. For example, Mattes (2009) states:

Let us leave behind the overused principles critical psychologists have referred to for much too long. Is it really still sufficient to brand "psychology" as reductionist, as fundamentally mistaken in its methodology, as abstract and lacking practical relevance, as an instrument of power, etc.? Rather, let us look at the actors and arenas of today's games, at the disciplinary, institutional, social and cultural contexts they are taking place in. I presume they will differ considerably from those of the high times of critical psychology. But: Let us undertake more than just a refurbishment or an update! Do not let us remain in the positions of our old pathways!

And:

Sectoral limits such as: levelling institutional criticism in institutions; epistemological, methodological or semantic criticism in the scientific disciplines; or political criticism in society, would certainly be too simplistic and too narrowly considered. These have existed, and have occasionally proven fruitful or enlightening, but have more often failed to surmount system boundaries in light of the superiority of the latter. (ibid.)

The following example serves to illustrate what we mean by the above. In current (and not only) critical psychological discussions, new insights from the biological and neurosciences are, with a referral to the reductionist argument, commonly rejected as "biologist", instead of making use of these contributions, based on a critical appraisal of the existing interfaces to cultural and social science models. In light of the complexity of the human existence, we consider the latter a necessity. "In light of the critically aggravating economic and political developments, (...) we have a growing intellectual, critical psychological responsibility towards the disadvantaged, the excluded and the suffering, as well as towards a societal system whose need for change (...), [we] can keep supporting by numerous enlightening and constructive contributions" (team of authors consisting of participants of the 1st critical psychological alp meeting, published in GkPP-Circular Letter 89, p. 4, 2009; changes made by the authors), because "if we don't go in and, considering the options for change, don't make them happen, we will remain outside, persisting in criticism" (oral statement of a participant at the "1st critical psychological alp meeting").

¹⁴ The social-democrat Austria of the 1970s and 1980s (the „Kreisky era“) is one good example: The most radical critics of psychiatry were soon included in the psychiatry reform movement in Austria in a decisive and comprehensive way, but not without forcing them to agree to far-reaching limitations of their original aims and to concessions in the implementation of new concepts.

Which established and which newly developed contradictions need to be considered for the mission of critical psychology?

“The simple but effective motto ‘go in and make it happen’ explicitly enforces the critical psychological attitude. It leads back – or forward – to the dialectics of psychological theory and practice and to one’s own life in contradictions, and to the dissolution of these in collective action”¹⁵ (team of authors consisting of participants of the 1st critical psychological alp meeting, published in GkPP-Circular Letter, p. 3, 2009).

The successes as well as the failures of epistemological and action endeavours in critical psychology, which arise out of the contradictions that ideas and actions are confronted with, are themselves made the subjects of learning and further development. Societal, psychological, but also personal contradictions need to be explored in joint discourses and practices in order to remain capable of action.

It seems to be of increasing importance to analyse more intensively the contradictions critical psychologists are confronted with as actors in the psychosocial arena. The following may serve as examples: the gap between ambitions and personal resources and the ability to act; the paradoxes of applying strategies of adaptation in order to achieve set targets at the risk of deformation of the personal subjectivity.

Cluster A: Contradictions referring to the subjects

Psychosocial work is often performed at the fringes of society (amongst others, migration, unemployment, mentally and/or physically impaired persons) and is therefore rarely of public interest, although it nonetheless succumbs to public, i.e. governmental, regulation and responsibility (compare Morgenroth & Negt, 2009). In recognition of this responsibility, the provision of care is delegated to counselling and service centres (usually of private ownership) and to the psychosocial health sector. But the agents holding these counselling and service mandates are themselves subject to economising which, strictly speaking, results in a reduction of available resources whilst the demand is growing enormously. Usually, this process results in a continuous reduction of resources available per client (per diems, charges for care, resources for the organisation’s infra structure and equipment); the public responsibility is thus reframed into billable cases that serve to demonstrate the willingness to save money, as has been requested since the proclamation of the crisis.

Persons working in the psychosocial field often find themselves permanently oscillating between “inside” (inclusion) and “outside” (exclusion), working under precarious conditions characterised by limited labour contracts, and suffering from permanent existential fear. They are meant to permanently work on relationships, perform controlling tasks and function as post-hoc mending service – while they themselves remain deeply insecure about their chances of making a living.

This contradiction does not only apply to psychosocial aides but increasingly also to highly qualified experts: having to meet an ambivalent mandate with a very ambivalent attitude. It is

¹⁵ In German: “Im so einfachen wie wirksamen Motto ‘Hineingehen und es auch tun’ setzt sich die kritischpsychologische Grundhaltung explizit durch. Sie führt zurück – oder vorwärts – zur Dialektik psychologischer Theorie und Praxis und zum eigenen Leben in Widersprüchen und ihrer Auflösung im kollektiven Handeln.”

working with contradictions in the literary sense of the word; working with contradictions, since solutions need to be achieved nonetheless, at least step by step; and working under conditions of contradictions, because psychosocial work, in part, prevails within the limits of ambivalences and conflicts (compare Morgenroth & Negt, 2009). According to Zygowski, psychosocial counselling is a process of interaction with the aim to

build up psychosocial competences as an entity of, on the one side, the capacity to reflect strain-induced psychosocial contradictions and ambivalences such as personal 'defence mechanisms' and, on the other side, action skills in form of the capacity and readiness to perform strain-reducing behaviour. (Zygowski, 1999, p. 20)

- Ambitions vs. personal resources and assets

As we can observe in graduated psychologists undertaking courses in clinical and health psychology, it is specific to psychosocial work that personal ambitions concerning professionalism, but also the use of professional activities to achieve societal change often can't be accomplished with available institutional and/or personal resources. For example, clients expect help to cope with mental strain, with problematic living conditions, etc.; however, psychologists are at the same time confronted with numerous difficulties that may hamper the completion of their tasks (such as restrictive targets from purchasers). On the other side, from the perspective of clients, there are hardly any viable alternatives to their current situation of crisis.

- Vision vs. daily grind

Although persons working in the psychosocial field usually consider an emancipatory attitude as self-evident, they are subject to the constraints and restrictions that are determined by different living conditions and communities, and which may hamper the prospect of social work "at eye level" and the development of the clientele's self-determined capacity to act. This, too, hinders practical work with a critical psychological background. However, we need to question how these contradictions can be used to develop opportunities to learn for the clientele, and what perspectives the pro's can take in this process.

- Strategies of adaptation to achieve set targets vs. personal deformation

The "spirit" of the early 21st century confronts people with contradictory demands: While they are, on the one side, under pressure for self-actualisation and individual fulfilment, they are, on the other, expected to refrain from social security and a certain standard of living for the sake of maximum productivity (the "me plc" scam); at the same time, they are held self-responsible for the resulting potential health and psychological consequences. The global crisis has further unsettled the already precarious patchwork identities. It is now imperative to develop new options for action and to evaluate in how far critical theories of subjectivity still serve to identify these subtle contradictions, and, on these grounds, to deduct an understanding for, and a development of, new perspectives that go beyond current thinking. These contradictions, too, do not only concern our clientele but also us as pros in the psychosocial field. We need to prompt ourselves not to waste our (cheap) labour force in "burn-out", which forces us to strategically use the societal conditions we are criticising.

Cluster B: Contradictions referring to society

Of course, the “classical” societal contradictions (professional, political, and institutional ones) still need to be further observed and analysed, in addition to new phenomena. The past decades have seen a social change of Western societies which experts characterise from three different angles. First, there has been a considerable increase in poverty especially with regard to single mothers, migrants, older persons and children. Second,

...even in the middle of society, personal status and position have become increasingly vulnerable, and even previously comparably well-integrated persons feel insecure with regard to their living conditions. (...) third, a growing interzone can be observed that has developed between the “inside” of society’s middle and its “outside”. This zone accommodates people who are neither well integrated nor belonging to the classical marginalised groups. French sociologist Robert Castel (2000) calls this the “zone of precarity”, which is located between the “zone of integration” and the “zone of exclusion”.¹⁶ (Kühnlein & Mutz, 2008, p. 338)

Next to a flexibilisation of the working world, the individualisation of lifestyles is another important driver of social change. On the one side, this process supports the liberation of individuals from normative restraints; on the other side, it brings about an increasing need to face unforeseeable changes and limited predictability. Thus, people are expected to develop personal independence in their way of life at the cost of uncertainty.

Furthermore, we would like to refer to a newly arisen societal contradiction of seemingly incalculable effects, at least in Austria. While, until the end of the last century, social-democrat politics were built on the ascertained foundation that an alleviated access to, and acquisition of, education would increase chances for secured employment and, by that, facilitate participation in processes of social relevance, consistently and for all groups of society, it seems that this political rule of the thumb is now only of limited validity. The most recent Austrian women’s report (from Spring 2010) points out that, in the case of women, higher education is not necessarily linked to higher job income and to better social participation. In other words, compared to the 1995 women’s report, women’s rates have, with regard to all types of educational achievements (except for the completion of compulsory education), outdistanced those of men, and women’s employment rates have also gone up considerably. Still, the gender gap (i.e. the disparity in incomes for comparable job profiles and levels of qualification) has also gone up in comparison to 1995 (comment: between 1995 and 2010, that is, during the period of right-wing dominated governance, there were no women’s reports providing systematic statistical analyses in Austria). To put it bluntly: women have not profited from the fact that they have outdistanced men with regard to education. For the sake of completeness we need to mention that, based on statistical analyses, the rule of the thumb “better education (and formational training) = better employment chances” still applies to men of all groups of society (including migrants) (compare also Section 3).

¹⁶ In German: “Zweitens sind Status und Positionen in der gesellschaftlichen Mitte zunehmend gefährdet, und selbst bislang relativ gut integrierte Menschen empfinden ihre Lebenslage als unsicher. (...) es zeigt sich drittens, dass sich zwischen dem ‘Draußen’ der gesellschaftlichen Mitte und dem ‘Draußen’ eine anwachsende Zwischenzone herausgebildet hat. In dieser befinden sich gleichzeitig Menschen, die weder gut integriert sind noch zu den klassischen Randgruppen zählen. Der französische Soziologie Robert Castel (2000) nennt dies die ‘Zone der Prekarität’, die zwischen der ‘Zone der Integration’ und der ‘Zone der Exklusion’ liegt.”

Cluster C: Contradictions referring to psychology as an academic subject

Contradictions relating to psychology as an academic subject still cannot be disregarded. Next to the analysis of the ongoing socially pacifying function of psychological expertise, there is still a need to question our respective practical actions with regard to their potentially relieving impact on the clientele; in our opinion, this is still a central task of critical psychological thinking.

On the other hand, we need to question whether the old and cherished enemy stereotype of mainstream psychology as reductionist and personality-deforming can still be maintained in light of the considerable further differentiation of psychological theory and practice during the last decades. Did not critical psychologists' demands for participative models in psychosocial work result in regarding those affected or suffering not solely as objects in need of help any more, but to concede them, at least in part also in mainstream, subject status and capacity to act? (Today, "empowerment" is a well-accepted part of the mainstream; capacity to act has, albeit expressed with other words, become part of "positive psychology" and salutogenic models).

This does not necessarily mean that critical psychology, in light of the history and relevance of the discipline, should, or could, not make further contributions. Much to the contrary: Critical psychology has a central task as the political conscience of the discipline:

Its aspiration for interdisciplinary networking ensures critical psychology a link to the psychological and discursive mainstream, on which it wants to exert a revealing and startling influence, but from which it can also benefit in areas where the mainstream goes beyond itself. The professional and political mission of critical psychology then is to break through the logic of subjecting people to external interests, as is immanent to the system, and to develop independent motives of getting involved in the social, cultural and societal debate.

From the subject-subject understanding of psychological thinking and acting – which implies that psychological experts and clients, patients and lays meet with equal rights and value – follows the more concrete professional need to interfere against every commercialisation of the health sector that would imply that only those who can afford health in the sense of an economic good are able to lead physically and mentally intact lives. In a preventative sense, this mission starts when critical psychology creates a realm to fight the economisation of relationships.¹⁷ (Team of authors consisting of participants of the 1st critical psychological alp meeting, published in GkPP-Circular Letter 89, 2009, p. 2)

¹⁷ In German: "Ihr Anspruch auf interdisziplinäre Vernetzung sichert der kritischen Psychologie die Schnittstellen zum psychologischen und diskursiven Mainstream, um in ihn aufdeckend und aufschreckend hineinzuwirken, aber auch um durch ihn zu gewinnen, wo er über sich selbst hinaus weist. Der professionelle und politische Auftrag kritischer Psychologie lautet dann, die systemimmanente Logik der Unterwerfung von Menschen unter fremde Interessen zu durchbrechen und eigene Motive zu suchen, sich in die sozialen, kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Auseinandersetzungen einzubringen.

Aus dem Subjekt-Subjekt-Verständnis psychologischen Denkens und Handelns – in dem sich psychologische ExpertInnen und KlientInnen, PatientInnen und Laien als gleichberechtigt und gleichwertig begegnen - folgt der engere professionelle Auftrag, gegen jede Kommerzialisierung des Gesundheitsbereiches, die den Anspruch auf ein körperlich und seelisch intaktes Leben nur noch für den ermöglicht, der sich die in eine Ware verwandelte Gesundheit leisten kann, einzuschreiten. Präventiv beginnt die Umsetzung dieses Auftrags, wenn kritische Psychologie einen Ort bildet, von dem her die Ökonomisierung der Beziehungen bekämpft wird."

The gender debate

By the establishment of fuzzy terminology and instruments of analysis in a broader societal discourse it was possible that their original range of meanings got blurred to arbitrariness and misused in discourses to conceal and preserve the societal conditions of power. The notion of “gender” is one good example to demonstrate that. It is used to blur conditions of power and predominance instead of revealing and unmasking contradictions in analytical acuity.

What does it conceal? Especially in the female-dominated psychosocial field, women are disadvantaged in many phases of their professional lives. On the one hand, jobs in the psychosocial and nursing field are primarily held by women; on the other side, it is especially this fact that needs to be debated. The political line of argumentation focuses either on the clientele’s right to be taken care of by a mixed team or on the high rate of male unemployment in general that needs to be reduced.

In Austria, the psychosocial field (and not only that field, and not only in that country) is characterised by a predominance of males in those areas that offer qualified jobs and a translation of appreciation into remuneration. Because of “criteria relating to the gender balance of professional teams”, men are given preference in the process of hiring new employees. While equal treatment, or even a preference of females in case of equal qualification, was the norm a few years ago, based on the idea of providing equal opportunities to males and females, men are now specifically addressed and employed. Thus, sex has become the main criterion for hiring new staff, while qualification is less important than ever before.

As already mentioned above, this is revealed in the latest Austrian women’s report. With regard to their level of education, women have enormously caught up during the last years; they are better educated than ever before, their employment rates are higher than ever, yet the gap in incomes between males and females is increasing. Women are more often working under precarious conditions, and they are strongly underrepresented in top and leading positions (where the proportion of females comes up to about 10%; Frauenbericht, 2010).

Typically, Austrian psychologists do not only hold a university degree but have also completed postgraduate courses in clinical and health psychology. Many job advertisements enlist the latter as a precondition for being hired. This pertains at least to the females on the Austrian psycho market – while the males are often hired without additional qualifications. This is where the vicious circle of women’s discrimination begins. Men (even if they are less qualified) move up quicker, since, for “reasons of gender”, they are once again more in demand.

The notion of “gender” does not only conceal women’s discrimination, but even implies progress, justice, and political correctness. The situation of Austrian psychologists that we used as an example illustrates this misuse of gender. Gender refers to the social role and to social characteristics, and is thus a socio-cultural construct, depending on social and cultural circumstances, while the aforementioned discrimination is based on the biological sex, and is thus trivialised by the use of the “gender” term.

Especially gender mainstreaming conveys a social-political concern, aiming at the broad acceptance of equal opportunities of the sexes at all levels of society. Gender Mainstreaming

became especially known in relation to the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997/1999 which declared this concept the official goal of the European Union's gender equality politics. Phrases containing "gender" that had come up in the course of these developments largely replaced expressions like "conditions of power", "patriarchy", "discrimination" etc. in the public discourse.

Gender mainstreaming differs from explicit women's politics in so far as both sexes are to be similarly included in the development of concepts. Did women's politics and feminism disappear in the process, or were they merged into gender mainstreaming? The task of gender mainstreaming is to lead away from a focus on "women" – and thus from so-called women-*"specific"* problems or areas of politics – and to focus on "gender" in general, aiming at an integration of a gender-sensible perspective into all social-political and economic areas so that equal opportunities can be demanded by everyone and in every area (Holz & Neusüß, 2006).

This involves not restricting efforts to promote equality to the implementation of specific measures to help women, but mobilising all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account at the planning stage their possible effects on the respective situations of men and women (gender perspective) This means systematically examining measures and policies and taking into account such possible effects when defining and implementing them. (Quoted from the Communication from the Commission on "Incorporating equal opportunities for women and men into all community policies and activities" (COM(96) 67))

In our opinion, the basic idea of gender mainstreaming, which is to systematically consider the different starting conditions as well as the different effects of interventions on men and women on the one side, and to interfere in the sense of women's or men's politics in case of incidences of discrimination on the other, remains questionable as long as equal opportunities of the sexes cannot be assumed. Prior to giving the same priority to the situation of men and women in the sense of gender mainstreaming, women's politics and targeted strategies to promote the advancement of women need to show effects first.

Because of the different starting conditions, gender mainstreaming is not supporting gender equality but rather draws the curtain over the discrimination against women. Gender mainstreaming strategies come along with the risk to establish stereotypes and traditional role models. The aforementioned referral to job advertisements that specifically target men in the social and health sector may serve as an illustration for the ineffective, or even counterproductive, effect of gender mainstreaming strategies in the current situation that is far from granting equal opportunities to both sexes.

Thus, we see a necessity to go back – and this was also demanded by the GkPP meetings of the last years – to those phrases that enable us to describe the situation more accurately and more pronouncedly. Discrimination should be named as such. Facts like the power divide, impacts of conditions of dominance, and suppression need to be called by their names. The phenomenon of an introduction of terminology that conceals the actual conditions, or even suggests that certain conditions of power have disappeared, can also be demonstrated for phrases like solidarity, autonomy, or freedom.

As critical psychologists, we need to unmask ideological mystifications and to analyse and name societal conditions with clear and distinct terminology.

How can we remain critical – in science and practice?

Consider the following extracts:

We know that critical psychology has, during four decades, accumulated and tested a lot of knowledge about human actions and feelings, about their dependence from their living conditions and conditions of power and about those effective alternatives for action that can liberate them from external and internal restrictions and constraints. If there is a mission for critical psychologists that can, then as now, count as a lifeline of sorts, it is the science- and experience-based mission to inform people and society, profoundly and offensively, about the social, cultural and individual having-become, as well as about the affectivities and opportunities, of the people.

The aim of this progressive movement is the societal, institutional and individual opening of settings for action, so as to let them develop into opportunities for resistance against conditions that hamper liveable lives. Knowledge and experience may be used to leverage these smaller and bigger scopes into diversified and enlarged settings for action. Therefrom, political-psychological theory and practice will directly approach the people – subversively, if need be – and exert their enlightening and altering influence on society.

The successes as well as the failures of this approximation of critical psychology as an epistemological driver and scope of action are made subject of learning and further development that develop out of the contradictions ideas and actions find themselves confronted with. Their theoretical and practical vibrancy can become a dynamic motivator for the inner vividness of critical psychology. They will nourish the delight in the creative power of critical options.

Our frames of reference are individual, estranged or crippled human beings and the conditions¹⁸ that are, in many respects, constricting them and eating away at them, notionally and emotionally, even in their sphere of personal privacy, down to the last detail. Our critical psychological strength is not least constituted by the fact that we are conceding to falsity as a possibility, in order to self-critically and reflectively reverse it, always close on the track of individual and societal events.¹⁹ (Team of

¹⁸ Social, institutional, societal, cultural, political and economic.

¹⁹ In German: “Wir wissen, dass kritische Psychologie im Laufe von vier Jahrzehnten viel Wissen über menschliches Handeln und Fühlen, über ihre Abhängigkeit von Lebensbedingungen und Machtverhältnissen und über jene wirkungsvollen Handlungsmöglichkeiten zusammengetragen und ausprobiert hat, die von äußeren und inneren Einschränkungen sowie Zwängen befreien können. Wenn es eine Aufgabe für kritische Psychologie gibt, die heute wie damals als so etwas wie ihre Lebensader gelten kann, dann ist es die von Wissen und Erfahrung getragene Aufgabe, profunde und offensive Aufklärung über das soziale, kulturelle und individuelle Gewordensein sowie die Befindlichkeiten und Möglichkeiten von Menschen zu ihnen und in die Gesellschaft hinein zu tragen. Ziel dieser aufklärerischen Bewegung ist die gesellschaftliche, institutionelle und individuelle Öffnung von Handlungsorten, um sie zu Bewegungsräumen für Widerstand gegen ein lebenswertes Leben erschwerende Bedingungen werden zu lassen. Wissen und Erfahrung können als Hebel genutzt werden, diese kleinen und größeren Bewegungsräume als diversifizierte Handlungsorte zu verbreiten. Von ihnen her nähern politisch-psychologische Theorie und Praxis sich unmittelbar den Menschen - wenn nötig auch subversiv - und strahlen erhellend und verändernd in die Gesellschaft hinein aus. Die Erfolge, aber auch die Misserfolge dieser Annäherung an die kritische Psychologie als Erkenntnismotor und Handlungsrahmen werden zum Gegenstand des Lernens und der Weiterentwicklung, die sich aus den Widersprüchen, auf die Idee und Tat stoßen, heraus entfalten. Ihre theoretische und ihre praktische Ausstrahlung können zum dynamischen Motivator für die innere

authors consisting of participants of the 1st critical psychological alp meeting, published in GkPP-Circular Letter 89, 2009, p. 1)

The consequences for the self-concept of critical psychology are:

Critical psychology should increasingly become visible as an individual and societal powerhouse, as a collective source of energy for intervention and change, supporting the reinforcement of its self-concept as a player in health and social policy that needs to be taken seriously.

Critical psychology should – both as a scientific discipline and as applied practice – offensively position itself, setting the scene in individual, social and global day-to-day discourse. It offers a reservoir of inspiring and exiting ideas and approaches for intervening action to people who want to engage in emancipatory and reform discourses. It forms a focal standpoint of potential and actual criticism towards the interrelations between systems of dominance and knowledge whose excommunicating and practically excluding intentions and consequences it reveals in order to offensively counteract them.

Its aspiration for interdisciplinary networking ensures critical psychology a link to the psychological and discursive mainstream, on which it wants to exert a revealing and startling influence, but from which it can also benefit in areas where the mainstream goes beyond itself. The professional and political mission of critical psychology then is to break through the logic of subjecting people to external interests, as is immanent to the system, and to develop independent motives of getting involved in the social, cultural and societal debate.

From the subject-subject-understanding of psychological thinking and acting – which implies that psychological experts and clients, patients and lays meet with equal rights and value – follows the more concrete professional need to interfere against every commercialisation of the health sector that would imply that only those who can afford health in the sense of an economic good are able to lead physically and mentally intact lives. In a preventative sense, this mission starts when critical psychology creates a realm to fight the economisation of relationships.

With regards to emotional-intellectual dogmas that can only hinder understanding and modified action, the critical psychological self-concept and self-esteem make their point very practically: The simple but effective motto “go in and make it happen” explicitly enforces the critical psychological attitude. It leads back – or forward – to the dialectics of psychological theory and practice and to one’s own life in contradictions, and to the dissolution of these in collective action.²⁰ (ibid., p. 2)

Lebendigkeit der kritischen Psychologie werden. Aus ihnen speist sich die Freude an der kreativen Kraft kritischer Möglichkeiten. Unsere Bezugssysteme sind der einzelne, entfremdete oder verkrüppelte Mensch sowie die Zustände, die ihn in vielfacher Hinsicht beengen und sich in ihm noch im Privaten gedanklich und gefühlsmäßig bis ins Kleinste festfressen. Unsere kritisch-psychologische Stärke besteht nicht zuletzt darin, uns den Irrtum als Möglichkeit zuzugestehen, um ihn selbstkritisch und nachdenklich wissend zu wenden, immer eng dem individuellen und gesellschaftlichen Geschehen auf der Spur.”

²⁰ In German: “Kritische Psychologie sollte mehr und mehr als individuelles und gesellschaftliches Kraftzentrum, als kollektive Quelle von intervenierender und verändernder Energie präsent werden, die der Stärkung des Selbstverständnisses als gesellschafts- und gesundheitspolitisch ernst zu nehmende Kraft dient.

The last sentence of the above quote raised an important point: It is not sufficient to individually further develop, question, and transfer one's own concrete critical psychological self-concept into professional action. If we would remain at that, we would – totally against our own analysis – leave out ourselves as subjects, getting reversed into objects (e.g. in support of others). What we need is a collective and solidaric effort to alter the social, economic and political conditions of our profession (and by that, of our individual existences). For this purpose, we need a (professional) political organisation that takes on the mission to impact on the respective current health and social policy “by holding contact and engaging in discussion with all institutions, organisations, parties and people that have a role in this context.”²¹ (ibid., p. 5)

Of course, this mission is not independent from the specific social-political position of the respective concrete potential partner in this discussion. The potential joint political and professional frames of reference need to be explored and analysed in order to find the leverages that will bring about the desired change of framework conditions for psychosocial action. In Austria, the Society of Critical Psychologist (GkPP) claims to follow this mission.

The crisis and its effect on our self-concept as critical psychologists in light of the high number of colleagues (young, qualified, female) in precarious working conditions

The focus on the contradictions critical psychologists find themselves confronted with in their practical work in the psychosocial field is increasingly gaining momentum. Today, the “theory-practice” debate needs to encompass other aspects than in the 1980s. The discourse about linking critical theory with critical practice is increasingly being replaced by discussions about the meaning of being a critical psychological professional in times of crisis.

Kritische Psychologie sollte sich – als wissenschaftliche Disziplin wie auch als ausgeübte Praxis - als Stichwortgeber in den individuellen und sozialen bis hin zu globalen Alltagsdiskursen offensiv verorten. Für Menschen, die sich in emanzipative und verändernde Diskurse einschalten, stellt sie ein Reservoir an- und aufregender Ideen und eingreifender Handlungsansätze dar. Sie bildet einen fokalen Standort möglicher und wirklicher Kritik in den Zusammenhängen von Macht-Wissens-Systemen, deren exkommunizierende und praktisch ausgrenzende Absichten und Folgen sie aufdeckt, um ihnen offensiv entgegenzuwirken.

Ihr Anspruch auf interdisziplinäre Vernetzung sichert der kritischen Psychologie die Schnittstellen zum psychologischen und diskursiven Mainstream, um in ihn aufdeckend und aufschreckend hineinzuwirken, aber auch um durch ihn zu gewinnen, wo er über sich selbst hinaus weist. Der professionelle und politische Auftrag kritischer Psychologie lautet dann, die systemimmanente Logik der Unterwerfung von Menschen unter fremde Interessen zu durchbrechen und eigene Motive zu suchen, sich in die sozialen, kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Auseinandersetzungen einzubringen.

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Wider emotional-intellektuelle Dogmen, die Verstehen und veränderndem Handeln nur hinderlich sein können, setzt sich kritisch-psychologisches Selbstverständnis und Selbstbewusstsein ganz praktisch durch: Im so einfachen wir wirksamen Motto “Hineingehen und es auch tun” setzt sich die kritisch-psychologische Grundhaltung explizit durch. Sie führt zurück – oder vorwärts – zur Dialektik psychologischer Theorie und Praxis und zum eigenen Leben in Widersprüchen und ihrer Auflösung im kollektiven Handeln.”

²¹ In German: “...indem sie Kontakt und Diskussionen mit allen Institutionen, Organisationen, Parteien und Menschen pflegt, die in diesem Zusammenhang eine Rolle spielen.”

In this process, two aspects are given priority. On the one hand, the self-definition as critical psychologist needs to be continuously re-defined in a space between personal ambitions and available resources. The challenge now is not any more just to position oneself in the psychosocial field; rather, critical psychologists need to question each activity/activity area; in their daily work, they need to find their position by permanently keeping the balance between an adequate (?) adaptation to societal reality and the maintenance of their critical psychological self-concept. This space needs to be questioned in a differentiated and continuous way.

On the other hand, in times of new poverty, new economic crises and a tightening of resources, critical action needs to be reflected from another angle than earlier on, not least with regard to our clients. To what extent does my critical attitude as a psychologist support the existence, health maintenance or development of my clients? The need for necessary adaptation always needs to be reflected also in relation to the treatment of the clientele. Options for survival or chances for individual leeway for our clients are often in opposition to critical attitudes. Thus, for the sake of the clients, counselling and treatment can, under given circumstances, be rather in favour of adaptation and may (temporarily) heavily challenge one's own psychological self-concept. Strategies of adaptation can be necessary in order to reach underlying targets. The personal subjectivity is in permanent danger of deformation.

Psychologists as well as their clients are, as already explained, similarly exposed to the increasing economisation of their living conditions: The vast majority of actors in the psychosocial field live in structures of dependence and under precarious conditions. Psychologists in Austria are, today, exposed to existential threats over prolonged periods of education, training and the acquisition of professional practice. These periods (university studies and subsequent postgraduate professional training to obtain a professional accreditation for the psychosocial field: compare the introduction of this article) take longer and longer, so that the professional career is started later and later, and remuneration cannot be expected right from the start – a situation that has resulted in the expression “the internship generation”. There is an increasing pressure to complete more and more post-graduate courses, to demonstrate practical experiences, to obtain additional qualifications etc. In a way, the situation resembles a Ponzi scheme,²² promising big bargains through investments in more and more specified and new professional training courses. In fact, a prosperous private market in professional training has developed in the psychosocial field (not only in Austria), which can only be called a “trading of certificates”, as it exists almost independently from actually needed knowledge and skills. And the related expenses are not covered by employers but rather by the participants in further education themselves, which often does not go without taking a loan. The professional careers, especially of qualified women in the psychosocial field, are however much less influenced by their qualification than by their political contacts or their (biological) sex.

During the last years, an initiative of young colleagues participating in further professional training has developed²³ in Austria (currently limited to Vienna and surroundings), aiming at improving the conditions for postgraduate professional training (quality assurance, adequate remuneration). After initial successes (media coverage, meetings with politicians), first signs of resignation can be observed by now: following their search for allies, there were attempts

²² Typically, only those offering them will profit from a Ponzi scheme while the participants will never reach the promised top positions.

²³ This initiative goes back to a professional training course on “Empowerment and self-help”, offered by the GkPP.

from outside to (politically) engross the initiative and to wrest “sponsoring fees” from them in return for promised advertisements. Currently their wish for independence is so strong that they eschew a confrontation with the political backgrounds of their plight. For an organisation like the GkPP, it is the order of the day to offer them support without refraining from analysing joint interests.

Consequences for a critical psychological professional representation and its political direction of impact

It has become necessary to reconsider the self-concept of critical psychological work in relation to changes of societal conditions which include the economisation of areas of human life, the reification of subjects and new structures of dependence. For this purpose, we make use of the expression “realms of opportunity”.²⁴

In a first step, this notion has to be applied to the conditions. The concrete task of a critical psychologist is to open realms of opportunity. These are spaces that allow mental experiments and hidden moods the ego cannot yet realise. They are jointly used for mutual cooperation between psychologists and clients.

In this context we need to discuss whether we, as critical psychologists, should expand our field of activity and our approaches e.g. by taking up aspects from sociology and social work, in order to situationally adapt our activities to the opportunities, and to explore further realms of opportunity. This would demonstrate the “added value” of our work more clearly and more visibly. However, these new realms of opportunity cannot be grasped and conceptualised beforehand and can only be explored in detail one by one; new and unexpected realms are emerging over and over again. It might be just this indeterminacy, their inconcluded and inconclusive variety, which empowers us to draw from new realms of opportunity.

It has become obvious that the opening of realms of opportunity is only possible together with, and through, others. For example, the persistence in contradictions can only be overcome by networks (such as professional peer groups, working alliances, and online platforms), but also by specific exchange (teaching, further education and training...). The critical psychological alp meetings are one good example. These meetings enabled us not only to open up controversial discussions but also to further develop our line of argumentation. Different approaches, impressions and also feelings were exchanged, and we experienced solidarity also in the sense of “mental hygiene” of critical psychology.

This process made clear that attitudes, too, can expand and reconfigure our realms of opportunity. Examples for such attitudes include the ability to understand detours not as setbacks or to stand contradictions before they can be overcome. Furthermore, we do not only have to be able to stand contradictions but also to negotiate them with others. Only by that can contradictions get the necessary drive to enable the further development of content.

A dialogue that is sensible enough to detect and negotiate contradictions can proudly face the three dangers of contradictoriness. The first danger of contradictoriness is fatalism, following the motto: “nothing matters”. Attitudes like these do not contribute to shaping realms of opportunity and to formulating answers to questions of our times. The second danger is to resign in petrification, which becomes most visible in the state

²⁴

In German: Möglichkeitsräume.

of depression. In this state, too, a conscious shaping of living environments is hardly possible. The third danger of contradictoriness, finally, is a radical foray into fundamentalist positions. Although allowing for new developments, a world that has created such positions is one that does not any more accept plurality and liberty. It recognises only what is not in contradiction to its own “philosophy”. The world is encased with a grid that creates aggressiveness because it was imposed on it by aggression. A monoculture of spruces instead of a mixed forest of species. Being able to uprightly deal with structural contradictions can therefore be considered a basic requirement for steering our presence towards a narration of humanity. This competence is of relevance to all of us, since the inconsistencies of society are reflected in the biography of each single person. I am my contradictions. Can we say that?²⁵ (Huber, 2007)

Not least, the development and usage of realms of opportunity needs appropriate tools. On the one hand, these can be abstract like for example the societal and psychosocial utopias that may serve as evaluation grids for specific options. On the other hand, they have to take the form of concrete guidelines for action, such as the recommendations to keep scientifically up to date, to engage in exchange with others (using new social media), and to disseminate knowledge.

Another “guideline for action” is the consciously chosen strategy to enter social systems and institutions, to identify, and to use in a solidaric way, the (subversive) leeway identified there. However, this can only be of lasting effect if the immediateness of individual strategy and action is collectively outrun. Therefore, a critically oriented professional-political organisation like the GkPP is obliged to enter arenas of social-political influence, to pose demands that are based on critical analysis, to give statements (e.g. about contemporary problems or plans to change legislation), and to recruit allies for the implementation of suggested change.²⁶ This would need to be supported by offensive public relations (not primarily towards the public scene of our own critical “biotope”), in order to critically and comprehensively debate complex facts and to offer solutions.

This can never go without a continuous referral to our own intellectual roots and the aforementioned self-concept – the “third critical psychological alp meeting” (and its biannually planned follow-up meetings) is one of the arenas to ensure that.

²⁵ In German: “Ein Dialog, der sensibel genug ist, um Widersprüche ausfindig machen und verhandeln zu können, kann auch den drei Gefahren der Widersprüchlichkeit aufrecht begegnen. Die erste Gefahr der Widersprüchlichkeit ist der Fatalismus, nach dem Motto: ‘Ist doch eh alles egal’. Haltungen wie diese tragen nicht dazu bei, Möglichkeitsräume zu gestalten und Antworten auf die Fragen unserer Zeit zu formulieren. Die zweite Gefahr ist die resignierte Erstarrung, die in der Depression ihren stärksten Ausdruck findet. Auch in diesem Zustand ist das bewusste Gestalten von Lebenswelten nur schwer möglich. Die dritte Gefahr der Widersprüchlichkeit ist schließlich der radikale Vorstoß in fundamentalistische Positionen. Hier ist Gestaltung möglich, doch die Welt, die diese Positionen erschaffen hat, ist eine, die keine Vielheiten und Freiheiten mehr kennt. Akzeptiert wird nur das, was nicht im Widerspruch zur eigenen »Philosophie« steht. Die Welt bekommt ein Raster, das aggressiv macht, weil es ihr durch Aggression aufgenötigt wurde. Fichtenmonokultur anstelle von artenreichem Mischwald. Ein aufrechter Umgang mit strukturellen Widersprüchlichkeiten stellt sich damit als notwendige Basiskompetenz dar, um die Gegenwart einer humanen Erzählung entgegen zu steuern. Diese Kompetenz ist für jeden von Bedeutung, denn die Widersprüche der Gesellschaft spiegeln sich in den Lebensgeschichten der Einzelnen wider. Ich bin meine Widersprüche. Können sie das sagen?”

²⁶ The GkPP is represented in numerous commissions and advisory boards of ministries and other structures of public administration, as well as of employer’s representation, and is a well-known provider of objective and profound expertise.

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