

Doing Critical Psychology in a State of Affluence

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Abstract

Critical psychologists' objective is to understand forms of social injustice and inequality, and ultimately change conditions to the better. Historically critical psychology evolved from the student revolt in Germany in the late 1960s as a reaction against an unjust capitalistic society, and poor living conditions for students. In recent years critical psychology appears to have been most prominent in societies in Latin America often characterized by their endemic poverty and forms of exclusion. What then of one of the wealthiest and well-managed countries in the world, Norway? In this paper I give a brief discussion of the challenges of doing critical psychology in a state of affluence. Does critical psychology become redundant? Does critical psychology's objective change? Or none of the above, which suggests that critical psychology and its aim, is the same independent of historical and national context.

Keywords: Critical psychology, geopolitical differences, affluence, Norway, neoliberalism

Introduction

Norway is largely thanks to the great oil and natural gas reserves discovered underneath the North Sea and Barents Sea in the 1960s an affluent society. Outside the Middle East Norway is the world's largest producer of oil and natural gas (per-capita). Norway has the second highest GDP per-capita (only beaten by Luxembourg) in the world, and enjoys the fourth highest GDP (PPP: purchasing power parity) per-capita (after Qatar, Luxembourg and Singapore) (World Economic Outlook Database, 2011). In addition, Norwegians can reasonably lay claims to be one of the world's foremost developed and stable countries in the world. From 2001 to 2007, and then again from 2009 to 2011 Norway topped the Human Development Index (HDI) which is a composite statistic used to rank countries according to their level of 'human development' - a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living (i.e. well-being and child welfare) (United Nations Development Programme, 2011). *Foreign Policy Magazine* (2011) ranked Norway second last (one above Finland) in their Failed States Index for 2011, and evaluated Norway as the world's second most well-functioning and stable country, and predicted that this will continue in the foreseeable future, thanks to continued oil and gas exports and a healthy economy. Moreover, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) in their seminal book *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* highlight Norway in their numerous graphs on equality as one of the healthiest and equally developed countries in the world (in contrast to the well-off, but unequal and unhealthy USA).

Now, why all this nationalistic boasting on behalf of Norway in an article about critical psychology you may have started asking yourself? Well, the reason for this fairly swaggering

introduction is to amply address what it means to live in a state of affluence like Norway and do critical psychology under these specific conditions. In posing this question, I hope to offer a small contribution from the geographical periphery of the Western world to the ongoing development of critical psychology by delving into the cultural-historical emergence of dissimilar 'critical tendencies' (Parker, 1999).

Critical psychology's standing in Norway

In the 2005 special issue of *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* that dealt with 'Critical Psychology in a Changing World: Contributions from Different Geo-Political Regions' Blakar and Nafstad (2006) wrote the report on critical psychology from Norway with the illustrative title 'Critical psychology in Norway: A brief review commenting on why critical psychology is currently virtually absent.' The authors address several possible reasons for this apparent absence: Firstly, the plea for critical psychology is naturally less obvious in a small, rich, stable society like Norway, and secondly, community psychology as a sub-discipline of psychology and closely related to critical psychology is by a stringent definition almost non-exciting in Norway (Blakar & Nafstad, 2006)¹. In fact psychologists as social scientists were employed by the Norwegian government in the nation rebuilding phase after World War II in the 1950s to solve societal problems. This resulted in a historical intimate bond between what can be called critical community psychology work and the governmental goals of the Norwegian welfare state, which is still evident today. Carlquist, Nafstad and Blakar (2007) maintain that the ideals of social justice and security, empowerment and community participation more or less have been important building blocks in the development of the Norwegian welfare state: Therefore critical community psychologists in Norway have often taken for granted that they belong to building a larger societal system defined by its fairness and social justice; hence, making opposing "outsider" branches of critical psychology virtually absent. Still, Carlquist et al.'s (2007) proposition is that given the gradual stronger influence of neoliberalism in Norway over the past decades critical community psychology "should render itself into a more prominent and critical discipline within Norwegian psychology, explicitly focusing on and arguing for alternative values based on solidarity and social equality" (p. 282).

The influence of neoliberalism in the past decades even in the traditional Scandinavian social democracies has been well documented (Harvey, 2005), yet neoliberalism as an accurate ideological conception of the state of affairs remains contentious in Norway due to a stableness in public management politics across Norwegian parties (Thorsen & Lie, 2006). Carlquist et al.'s (2007) assumption that neoliberalism reengages Norwegian critical psychologists from their long slumber, through the increased danger of social and economic inequality is reasonable, but stems perhaps more from sympathetic concerns for the future of critical psychology than strict realistic assessments of the existing societal changes. I will now look into some aspects regarding the struggle for critical psychology in Norway in the current.

The Norwegian Psychological Association as critical community psychologists

Foremost the close link between community psychologists and official governmental aims as reported by Carlquist et al. is still conspicuous, in particular as The Norwegian Psychological

¹ Blakar and Nafstad (2006) maintains that community psychology is the sub-discipline most commonly linked with critical psychology, but also points to feminist psychology and critical works on ideological assumptions in language as important areas of critical psychology in Norway. However, my analysis in this paper is mainly refined to community psychology as critical psychology.

Association (NPF) in recent years has taken an active role in close collaboration with governmental and local authorities to provide Norway's more than 400 local municipalities with permanently stationed community psychologists. The Norwegian model project was only just presented at the 8th European Congress of Community Psychology (ECCP) entitled 'Community Psychology, Critical Issues' arranged on September 15-16 2011 in the city of York². A report from the Norwegian delegates visit to ECCP was published on NPF's home page, which gives us an interesting testimony of a 'culture clash'. The headline reads "Revolution and harmony under one ceiling" whereas NPF's Per Halvorsen (2011) sums up the experience of participating in the following: "When the European community psychologists met at the ECCP Congress in September, it was difficult to spot a common platform. The distance is apparent between the strong critical and system opposing British and central European versions of the discipline and the harmony behind the initiative of local psychologists in Norway." The Norwegian model project, 'Psychologists in the Community', is a result of long-term political advocacy and close collaboration with official health authorities, which presently has resulted in 110 local psychologists stationed around Norway's local communities, and a new legislation that declares that mental health care is a municipal responsibility. The Norwegian model is far from the outcry outgoing head of the European Community Psychological Association (ECPA) David Fryer launched at the official opening, of this year's ECCP, in which Fryer (2011) called for a community psychology that explores the destructive potential in societal structures like unemployment, poverty, the pharmacological industry and discrimination based on race and sexual orientation. The goal of community psychology is to promote justice through a progressive redistribution of social power (Fryer, 2011). As Halvorsen (2011) rightly observes, Fryer's radical message of a complete systemic change is a stark contrast to the harmonious Norwegian model where NPF is a close collaborator with official health authorities. The President of NPF Tor Levin Hofgaard commented on this gap in his conference presentation at ECCP: "The Norwegian experience shows that it is possible to change the way you work from the inside. If you position yourselves on the outside of society and stands as revolutionaries, you may find yourselves being ruled out as irrelevant" (Halvorsen, 23.09.2011, para. 4). Although Halvorsen avoids a strong bias towards the Norwegian model in his actual reporting from ECCP, as a neutral reader it is easy to form the impression that Norway has succeeded where other countries have failed. The reportage is for instance illustrated with a picture of two opposite pointing signs that reads 'War' and 'Peace'. 'War' has been crossed out, and the underlying message looks as though it is: 'Look to Norway which has succeeded in implementing community psychology by peaceful means'. Norway's representative in the ECPA, Nicholas Carr echoes the earlier observation of Carlquist et al. when he explains the huge differences in community psychology across nations: "Community psychology is different because the situation in the countries is quite different. In a lucid and prosperous welfare state like Norway where distance to governmental authorities are relatively short, the solution will be unlike Britain, which is currently experiencing the greatest cuts in public sector since the rule of Margaret Thatcher" (Halvorsen, 23.09.2011, para. 8).

The Norwegian representatives are right in pointing out that the national differences to a large degree dictate the role of community psychology, and Norway (like in many other aspects) appears better off with its model project. Still, is there a risk that something is lost when the collaboration between psychology and state is this close; and community psychology becomes a useful ally for official governmental neoliberal politics? The question must be asked, especially when the official labor union of psychologists, normally associated with an overly

² The author did not participate at the conference. I base the reporting on written sources only, which may not always correspond with the actual experience of those who did participate.

optimistic positivistic framing of psychology's role in society (Jansz & van Drunen, 2004), in Norway NPF, can easily take on the role as advocates of community psychology. Fryer in his address to the ECCP stressed exactly this point – community psychology despite its fundamental societal commitment is not protected from the risk of supporting suppressive interests like mainstream psychology: “I call for a de-construction, de-legitimation and de-ideologisation of the socio-political processes through which oppressive claims, including oppressive community psychology claims, are given the status of ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth’; for rendering transparent and accountable of the subjective, material, institutional, societal, political and ideological interests served by what is, and what is not, thought, said and done by community psychologists” (2011). Fryer draw on Michel Foucault and in particular Nikolas Rose in his statement that community psychology is just another part of the ‘psy’-complex and therefore needs constant unremitting critique: “Psychology is a set of disciplinary practices central to governmentality in 21st century neo-liberal societies, is community psychology exempt from critique? I think not” (2011, p. 2).

It appears that the Norwegian community psychology model, which is an initiative led by NPF – the official labor union of registered Norwegian psychologists – is in a sense an exceptional example of how even the assumed critical and system opposing parts of psychology – like community psychology can become a part of neoliberal government's extended reach into the life of its citizens. Still, to question whether the well-meaning initiative of NPF in placing municipal psychologists throughout Norway's more than 400 local municipalities, are in danger of becoming useful agents of neoliberal politics is in practice rather difficult. Why? For once, as NPF president Hofgaard quite right calculates: Fryer's critical community psychology in opposition in a country like Norway is quickly perceived as merely ‘irrelevant’. In fact, governmentality means exactly this: The state and the citizens desire the same thing: Good mental health so that the inhabitants can manage themselves. As Rose acknowledges, to question this psy-infused individual autonomy and personal authenticity secured by experts (like your municipal psychologists) is under the present rule of neoliberal democracy merely possible as ‘an experiment of thought’ (1999, p. 262).

Critical psychology engagement with social injustice and inequality

If one were to succeed as a critical psychologist in condemning the nationwide implementation of community psychologists in Norway one would perhaps have to show that the neoliberal welfare state produced social injustice and inequality which contribute to the increase in the levels of mental health problems in the population. Carlquist et al. (2007) maintains that “After decades of reducing the gaps between people [...] social inequality is again increasing in the Norwegian society” (p. 294), and successively the authors argue that critical psychologists central concerns should be to attend to solidarity and equality. However, whether the level of inequality in Norway really is increasing is disputed. The latest official report shows that income gaps in Norway increased to a certain degree from the middle of the 1980s to the middle of the 2000s, whereas the economical gap has actually decreased from 2006 and onwards (Ministry of Finance, 2011). Yet, even more important is perhaps that fact that Norway in a global comparison is among the countries with less differences regarding standards of living. As initially stated Norway, according to Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), is among the most ‘equal’ countries in the world (alongside Japan and the other Scandinavian countries). The income gap between the 20% richest and the 20% poorest Norwegians (counting by household income after taxes and benefits) is about four times as rich, whereas the most unequal countries (Singapore, USA, Portugal and UK) the difference between poor

and rich is at least twice as big (Singapore ten times as rich). Low-income is also less inheritable than in other countries, both in purely economic measures like income and wealth, and when looking at other standards of living, like education, health, housing and other welfare benefits (Ministry of Finance, 2011). In addition, in the last decades there has been a substantial increase of wealth, and most groups have experienced a marked ascent in real income (Ministry of Finance, 2011). Of course, even if Norway can lay claims to be among the most equal societies in the world this does not mean that continued work for a closure of the gap between poor and rich is not a meaningful pursuit. Nonetheless, claims that argue without reservations that neoliberalism is dramatically creating social inequality are not trustworthy. Therefore, critical psychology in Norway called on to battle neoliberalism in regards of social injustice seems less convincing, as many psychologists whom naturally are socially and politically minded might not accept the bait since Norway is fairing quite well after all. There is a substantial danger that radical critical psychologists like Fryer are conceived as political radical emissaries more than as academics with reasonable arguments, making them literary 'irrelevant.' To summarize the dilemma: The expected continued income and welfare growth for all groups in Norway in the foreseeable future looks as if it will guarantee that Norwegian critical psychologists will be rendered as a marginal group³.

Discussion

So, is critical psychology in Norway practically redundant and reserved for idealists who have special interests and live in the past? Despite my reservations on behalf of a revitalized critical psychology devoted to social injustice and inequality, I do not believe this to be the final story. Nevertheless, critical psychology must perhaps look into new areas in need of critical attention. An idea for such an area for attention is that critical psychology in an affluent society in a country like Norway should expand from the basic material level of social injustice and inequality to the inclusion of the spiritual level of meaning. What happens in a country where a majority of people have their basic material needs covered and much free time to pursuit on their own is the flourishing of individual self-realization, self-help courses, psych-educative books, and generally what has been characterized as the «makeover»-culture involving everything from corporeal enhancements i.e. cosmetic surgery to psychological, pseudo-religious and spiritual development, i.e. philosophical practice (Heller, 2007; McGee, 2005)? People come to speak and understand themselves and the social world in a therapeutic manner. Norwegian society in 2011 clearly corresponds to notions like the «therapeutic culture» where both the individual freedom to pursue self-actualization and the vulnerability to mental health diseases blossom to unprecedented new heights (Madsen, 2011). The demand for psychologists who can attend everything from heavily depressed suicidal youths to answer questions about the psychology in everything from parenting to personal economy as self-help experts in the advice columns of weekly magazines and newspapers is therefore greater than ever. And so, the need for critical psychology that keeps an eye on mainstream psychology is greater than ever before. The seemingly non-stop expanding 'therapeutic matrix' under neoliberalism which more or less becomes the predominant ontological centers of meaning in the Western world (Illouz, 2008), means that politics is reconfigured on the level of subjectivity – therefore self-governing techniques like 'autonomy', 'self-realization' and 'self-esteem' are politicized therapeutic concepts, and in need of added critical scrutiny. There is simply no reason to believe that mainstream psychology will satisfactorily attend this in a historical and geo-political situation of greater demand.

³ Of course, other forms of exclusion and marginalization not directly tied with economy related to ethnicity, race and religion are also prevalent in Norway, and worthy of critical psychologists attention.

An example is cosmetic surgery which in a brief period of time over just 10-12 years has succeeded in becoming normalized and morally accepted in Norway. Largely thanks to a therapeutic jargon which helps both cosmetic surgeons and 15-year old girls to lay claims to the need of different cosmetic surgery due to low 'self-esteem' (Madsen, unpublished). Whether psychologist should establish a new niche as recruitment agents and interviewers for the cosmetic industry, securing that the clients motivation (i.e. self-esteem is low enough before the operation) is the right one, or psychologists should take an active critical stance, not simply as moralists, but by starting to critically evaluate how a psychological concept like 'self-esteem' has become a tragic parody of Miller's almost half a century old credo of 'giving psychology away' (Miller, 1969). Tapping into the therapeutic culture of corporeal and mental makeovers critical psychologists may also come to rediscover neoliberalism, but not primarily in the habit of political-economy, but as a style of government which helps to create governable citizens⁴. Sometimes, it seems, i.e. in Fryer's (2011) recent ECCP opening talk that psychologists in the role of neoliberal governmental engineers is portrayed as something suspicious in itself. However, in Rose's influential studies on 'governmentality' this is far from obvious: Psychology must be recognized as a necessary condition for the modern exercise of autonomous freedom. To question psychology is to question late modern individual freedom and how we take ourselves to be autonomous free agents. The downside is rather a greater stress on the shoulders of the individual (i.e. mental health problems), and ultimately the disappearance of the possibility of traditional critique (cf. Madsen & Brinkmann, 2011). Critical psychologists should therefore avoid simplistic pre-Foucault ideology arguments, but recognize that 'psy' has intervened into the social fabric with a realistic assessment of its pros (greater individual freedom) and cons (greater individual vulnerability). Thus, I believe Norway is a good illustration of Parker's (1999) universal assessment that critical psychologists needs to become more theoretically advanced in order to become more socially relevant for peoples' everyday lives.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented Norway as a case of an affluent society, and asked what that means for the challenge of critical psychologists. As critical psychology per definition seeks radical societal changes the harmonious Norwegian society resembles a tough stumbling block. The main argument in the article is that critical psychology does not necessarily become less needed in an affluent society, but the overall approach of critical psychology must to some extent be reallocated. Norway is in a sense a neoliberal welfare state, with the lowest gaps of inequality in the world. This does not mean that critical psychological attention to social inequality and injustice is in vain, but ambitious calls for the rediscovery of critical psychology cannot alone rest on the assumption that a large share of community psychologists in Norway necessarily recognizes this as an animating area of interest. Rather neoliberal affluence means a turn in our orientation to the world, to a direction of individual physical and mental self-management. The mounting «therapeutic culture» and «makeover»-cult in Norway suggests that critical psychologists have not been made redundant just yet. Critical psychology undoubtedly has an important role to play in the future- as watchers of mainstream psychology, and as critical examiners of how neoliberalism is presently injecting itself into the desires and dreams of 'psy'-subjects quest for 'inner and outer fitness' to quote Danish fitness queen Charlotte Bircow.

⁴ There is of a course a political-economy side to this as well; i.e. that 'class' still matters in basically every aspect of life from income to health, despite the fact that everybody are "free" in their choices. The point I am simply trying to make is that neoliberalism has another side that critical psychologists also should attend to.

To assume that critical psychology due to increased wealth is becoming redundant is overly optimistic and gullible. Yet, to insist that nothing changes in a state of affluence is improbable and self-defeating. Too much adaptability or too much reliability will either way ensure critical psychology as 'irrelevant'. The challenge of critical psychologists in Norway is to find the right balance between the 'old' and the 'new'; and remain critical to the promises of neoliberal advancements and capitalist society like their predecessors, but also constantly ask themselves to critically appraise whether the ideological map of the most pressing societal issues needs reordering.

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