

## **Kritische Psychologie**

Refining theory, methodology and empirical research

Batur, Sertan; Kessi, Shose; Marvakis, Athanasios; Painter, Desmond; Schraube, Ernst;  
Strohm Bowler, Eva; Trivila, Sofia

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## Introduction

# Kritische Psychologie: Refining theory, methodology and empirical research

Sertan Batur, Shose Kessi, Athanasios Marvakis, Desmond Painter,  
Ernst Schraube, Eva Strohm Bowler and Sofia Triliva

Since the beginning of modern psychology, a variety of different and sometimes even conflicting scientific visions of psychology have co-existed. This co-existence has not always been harmonious. It has initiated fruitful critical debates as well as struggles for influence and dominance within the scientific community. The question of who acquires dominance in a certain time depends not only on the relevance and quality of knowledge and insight, but also on the societal and historical situation. Before World War II, for example, a multiplicity of visions of psychology claimed dominance in various intellectual centers in Europe and North America and forced other conceptions to cooperate, tried to push them into marginal positions, or even tried to exclude them entirely. After World War II, European traditions of psychology lost their influence in favor of North American functionalism. In the late 1960s, critical psychologies emerged in opposition to the dominance of functionalist and instrumentalist psychologies, integrating critique as a fundamental dimension of scientific psychology. In recent years, these approaches have developed from rather local initiatives to more systematic interconnected dialogues around the world. Several special journal issues have collected and traced the development of critical psychologies in countries around the globe, invite mutual collaboration, and elaborate on the fundamental significance of critique in the development of psychological knowledge (e.g., the ARCP issues of 2006 and 2013, the recently published,

voluminous *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* [Teo, 2014] as well as the *Handbook of Critical Psychology* [Parker, 2015]).

*Kritische Psychologie* represents a substantial and distinct voice in this polyphony. It has its origins in Germany, especially at the Free University Berlin and has developed over the years into a tradition of thought that flourishes in various places around the world. This special issue brings together current research of *Kritische Psychologie* as well as work inspired by or developed in response to it. In these 63 articles, younger and established scholars from universities or other contexts present how they work in and with this tradition of thought. They describe how they explore the problems people encounter in their everyday world, they share how they rethink and expand psychological theory, methodology and empirical research, and they discuss, apply, criticize, elaborate, link, and compare *Kritische Psychologie* with other theoretical and geopolitical approaches, often going beyond the disciplinary boundaries of psychology.

The idea of this issue is not so much to substantiate a particular tradition of thought; it is more about using its legacies to continue an open and collective project of an emancipatory psychology and social science. To that effect, the point is not the engagement in a particular interpretation of *Kritische Psychologie*; rather, it is to present that and how one can use *Kritische Psychologie* in one's work – affirmative, critically, linking it with/to other approaches, showing overlapping fields, identifying shortfalls and omissions etc. Therefore, this special issue includes not only work “from within” *Kritische Psychologie*, but also work “from outside” – discussing it, identifying links and potential overlaps, and thereby shedding more light on *Kritische Psychologie*. The project of an emancipatory psychology and social science is necessarily much broader than *Kritische Psychologie* or any other singular approach. We hope this special issue invites new links, networks and dialogues between scholars within *Kritische Psychologie*, but also between the polyphony of critical psychologies and other critical voices within the social and human sciences. Ultimately, it is our hope that it will facilitate a constructive debate to rethink psychology for our future societies.

### **The development of *Kritische Psychologie* in the contexts of other critical psychologies**

A vital catalyst for the development of critical psychologies in the late sixties of the past century was the lack of relevance of traditionally generated psychological knowledge. During that time, significant psychological research

was based on experimental laboratory studies, in which very specific and isolated hypotheses were tested with a quantitative, especially experimental-statistical methodology. However, within this paradigm, the actual reality of human life in the everyday world and the complexity of psychological phenomena in their internal relations and contexts could not be adequately addressed. A debate about the relevance of psychological knowledge emerged, and scholars realized that the lack of relevance was connected to the applied theoretical and methodological apparatus. This apparatus had been copied, without reflection, from the natural sciences and was thus based on a scientific vision of dissection and de-contextualization. To be clear, such a vision has its strengths. However, it adopts a methodology first—understood as a fixed procedure—instead of generating, out of the phenomena, a decisive *psychological* research vocabulary. Such “methodolatry,” as David Bakan (1967) termed this confusion, reduces the relationship between humans and the world to measurable cause-and-effect relationships. Moreover, it systematically excludes subjectivity: the experiencing and acting dimensions of human life and the societal world, in and through which psychological phenomena emerge and develop. The reduction of entangled social relations to isolated and external stimuli, and the rupture of the dialectics between individual and society responded to the ideology of neo-liberal capitalism: The individual is responsible for his/her own misery or fortune, while the psychologist’s task is to transform the individual, rather than the social relations and practice of everyday living. The lack of relevance combined with such a radically disembodied and individualizing research practice resulted in substantial critiques of dominant approaches of modern psychology and initiated the development of critical psychologies in various countries around the globe. (For more detailed descriptions of the historical development of critical psychologies, see, e.g., Dafermos & Marvakis, 2006, Holzkamp, 1972; Parker, 1999; Teo, 2005; 2015). Within the multitude of initiatives, three major and interrelated visions of critical psychology emerged; they still resonate in the discussions today.

One line of critique was directed at psychology as a whole: a specific kind of *anti-psychology*. Through critical studies of the role of psychology in society, scholars came to realize that the production of psychological knowledge is by no means value-neutral. Instead, it is intimately connected with ruling relations in capitalist society; the knowledge that is developed directly serves capitalist interests. The only adequate solution appeared to be the dissolution of academic psychology as a whole. “Smash psychology” became the motto of the day. In May 1969, for example, at the University Hannover, Germany, the final declaration to one of the most significant critical psychology conferences during the student movement described psychology as a lost cause, a hopelessly un-

political discipline that served people in power and eliminated or integrated system-induced contradictions. The declaration ended with a call to disband psychological departments, to, effectively, “Smash psychology!” (declaration reprinted in Rexilius, 1988, p. 408). As crucial as this vision might have been in placing the societal mediation of the production of scientific knowledge on the agenda and questioning the social relevance and knowledge interest of psychological research, it nevertheless remains an abstract perspective, unable to turn its critique into the development of a critical *psychology* that actively addresses and transforms the conflictuality of life in contemporary society.

In response, a second primary vision of critical psychology centered on this very conflictuality of the social world by developing *critical psychology as a critique of society*. The focus of psychological critique here is on the critical analysis of societal conditions such as ideology and discourse in an attempt to uncover and provide evidence for the social, ideological and discursive character of psychological theory and methodology and their legitimization of ruling relations. Moreover, this critique contributed critical knowledge to the understanding of the specific situations and contexts in which human subjects live their everyday life. However, to a certain extent, this line of thought also remains abstract: it is still partly caught in an external, socially disembodied perspective because it leaves psychology itself untouched and fails to engage in the renewal and conceptual rebuilding of psychological theory and methodology. Given this lack of re-conceptualization, the critical investigation of social conditions has to draw on already existing psychological frameworks, including their de-contextualizing and disembodiment research practices.

A third major vision of critical psychology tries to address this limitation by focusing not solely on a critique of society, but also on a *critique of psychology*. In so doing, it seeks to fundamentally *rethink and rebuild psychological theory, methodology and research practice*. The critique here does not reject psychology, but aspires to a *unity of critique and further development* capable of contributing to a new, critical, situated, and socially embodied conception of psychology.

## **Major phases of Kritische Psychologie and the structure of the special issue**

*Kritische Psychologie* is particularly inscribed in this third vision of developing critical psychologies. Although fundamentally collective in its orientation, the work of Klaus Holzkamp has played a pivotal role in the development of Kritische Psychologie (Osterkamp & Schraube, 2013). Up until now, its body of

work can be differentiated into two major phases. In the first, scholars were engaged in fundamentally re-thinking the theoretical and methodological language of psychology. Drawing on cultural-historical activity theory, *Kritische Psychologie* tried to renew the psychological vocabulary, not only by critically redefining singular concepts (for example, perception, emotion, or motivation), but also by developing a systematically founded and integrated theory of human subjectivity, including its various psychological dimensions. The aim was not just to develop a new theoretical framework for critical psychology, but to contribute to the development of *psychology in general* through a seminal renewal of its conceptual foundation. As a result, a detailed *Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject* redefined psychology as a historically developed theory about subjects as societal beings and re-constituted it as a science for and about these subjects. (The most in-depth presentation of this period can be found in Holzkamp, 1983; summaries of the discussions of this period, e.g. Dreier, 2020; Holzkamp, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Tolman, 1994; Tolman & Maiers, 1991).

The second major period of the development of *Kritische Psychologie* is characterized by work *with* this newly developed psychological vocabulary, by the refinement and expansion of specific theoretical and methodological concepts and by their substantiation in empirical explorations of human life in various fields of everyday practice. The body of work presented in this special issue is located mostly in this second period of *Kritische Psychologie*. All articles are engaged in the critical rethinking of theoretical, methodological or empirical matters. Collectively, the contributions integrate these three dimensions; however, individually, they tend to place particular emphasis on one of them. Therefore, we have grouped the papers as follows:

Part I: Refining Theoretical Concepts

Part II: Refining Methodology and Research Practice

Part III: Empirical Investigations of Human Life

The question of the societal relevance of scientific knowledge as well as the commitment to taking seriously the problems of human life in contemporary society represent constitutive principles of critical psychologies. We know that the world today is hanging by a thread. Scientists around the globe realize the danger and are warning that “time is running out” (Ripple, et al. 2017, p. 1027). The problems we encounter—both as individuals and as collectives—have intensified. The old ways of disembodied psychological thinking—where the complexity and connectedness of human life are out of sight—will not help to overcome the problem: they are part of it. In contrast, critical psychologies employ detailed analytical conceptions to examine the internal relationship between humans and the world in its conflictuality. In doing so, they offer new

ways of embodied thought, vital elements in the development of a possible future society.

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**Sertan Batur** is Psychologist and Youth Worker. He is working at a youth center in Vienna and at the Vienna Men's Counselling Center, Austria. E-mail: [sertanbatur@yahoo.com](mailto:sertanbatur@yahoo.com)

**Shose Kessi** is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology and Acting Dean of the Humanities Faculty at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. E-mail: [shose.kessi@uct.ac.za](mailto:shose.kessi@uct.ac.za)

**Athanasios Marvakis** is Professor of Clinical Social Psychology at the School of Primary Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. E-mail: [marvakis@eled.auth.gr](mailto:marvakis@eled.auth.gr)

**Desmond Painter** is Associate Professor of Social Psychology at the Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. E-mail: [dpainter@sun.ac.za](mailto:dpainter@sun.ac.za)

**Ernst Schraube** is Professor of Social Psychology of Technology and Everyday Life at the Department of People and Technology, Roskilde University, Denmark. E-mail: [schraube@ruc.dk](mailto:schraube@ruc.dk)

**Eva Strohm Bowler** holds a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and a Master's in Special Education. She leads the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the Berkeley Adult School and is co-founder and executive director of AccessEd Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to closing the educational opportunity gap for low-income families in the San Francisco East Bay. E-mail: [ed@accessedfoundation.org](mailto:ed@accessedfoundation.org)

**Sofia Triliva** is Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Department of Psychology at the University of Crete, Greece. E-mail: [triliva@uoc.gr](mailto:triliva@uoc.gr)