Philosophical Concerns in Critical Psychology

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Chapter Topics

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psychology as a problematic science

An academic field of study is problematic when it does not address, let alone resolve, basic issues. This has been the case with psychology, which has excluded or neglected key problems or pretended they do not exist. As described in this chapter, three interconnected issues make psychology problematic: (a) a limited understanding of the complexities of psychology's subject matter and ontology; (b) a preference for a selectively narrow epistemology and methodology; and (c) a lack of reflection (critical thinking) on psychology's ethical–political concerns and praxis.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that these problems reflect only contemporary concerns. Indeed, from its beginning as an institution and independent field of study, psychology has had to cope with ongoing critiques (see Teo, 2005; Woodward & Ash, 1982). One of the most influential critiques in the eighteenth century was developed by Immanuel Kant, who argued that the study of the soul — this is what the term psychology originally meant — could not be natural-scientific because psychology could not be made into an authentic experimental discipline like physics. Instead, he recommended that the field limit itself to a description of the soul and focus on the notion of moral agency, the ability of the person to act intentionally according to moral principles.
In the nineteenth century, psychology was transformed from a philosophical discipline into a natural-scientific discipline. Adopting the principles and methods of the natural sciences meant that mainstream academic psychology shunted aside genuine psychological topics such as subjectivity – subjective, personal experiences and the meanings that human beings attribute to these experiences. This transformation had intellectual, but more importantly, sociohistorical origins: when psychology emerged as a discipline and was struggling for academic respect in terms of money, power, and recognition, it seemed more promising to align itself with the highly successful natural sciences rather than with the seemingly ambiguous human sciences such as history (Ward, 2002). Later it was hoped that the natural sciences would appreciate psychology if the discipline committed itself to ostensibly objective topics such as behaviour rather than to notions of the soul or human experience. This sentiment of establishing psychology as a rigorous discipline was so strong that even Sigmund Freud intended psychoanalysis as a natural science (see Habermas, 1968/1972).

This attempt to establish psychology as a natural science like physics led to many critiques and also to what are known as crisis discussions within psychology. Indeed, the first systematic book on the crisis of psychology was published by Willy (1899), who challenged the dominant natural-scientific oriented research programmes of his time. He identified speculative theory-building and an inadequate methodology as sources of psychology's crisis. The crisis literature has been on the rise since the 1920–1930s and again since the 1960s and 1970s (for an overview, see Goertzen, 2005). A critique of psychology's lack of ethical–political relevance can also be found in the nineteenth century when Beneke (1845) suggested that psychology could help overcome political, social, and religious tumults. He challenged mainstream psychology's focus on theory rather than practice and he protested that German psychology refused to deal with social reality.

A relevant question in a book on critical psychology is this: Should all approaches that provide a critical evaluation of psychology's mainstream be labelled critical psychologies? A general concept of critical psychology would include all approaches that critique psychology's subject matter, or methodology, or praxis, or a combination of these elements. A specific concept of critical psychology, on the other hand, would include approaches sceptical of the mainstream that give primacy to the ethical–political dimensions of praxis. I use the term praxis in contrast to the term practice to emphasize the political nature of human activity in any applied area. In addition, it should be mentioned that while some psychologists use the label critical psychology to address their own psychological position (see Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Hook, 2004; Sloan, 2000; Walkerdine, 2002), others who are critical of the mainstream do not use the term (e.g., some feminist or social-constructionist psychologists).

Very prominent in, but not limited to, critical psychology are cultural–historical (Marxist), feminist, social-constructionist, and more recently, postcolonial critiques. All have fuelled the critical literature on the
mainstream's limitations. For example, Marxist approaches could be interested in the role of insurance companies in the development of diagnostic manuals; feminist approaches might question generalizations of developmental models based exclusively on male participants; social-constructionists might look at the role of persuasion in making psychological theories dominant in a culture; and postcolonial experts might question the significance of American and European theories and practices for African contexts. More importantly, these various critiques provide alternative approaches, some of which sometimes contradict one another.

**ontological concerns and psychology's subject matter**

In philosophy, the term ontology refers to the study of Being (the study of the fundamental characteristics of reality). In psychology, ontological studies address the nature of the psychological 'object': What should psychologists study? What are the specific and defining characteristics of the psychological subject matter? Ontological discussions include the proper definition of psychology, its appropriate subject matter, the models for representing human mental life, metaphors for understanding human subjectivity, theories of the human mind, theories of human nature, the relationship between mind and body, and so on.

It is important to keep the following distinctions in mind: the word *psychology* refers to a subject matter, a field of topics, a discipline, and a profession. In Western history the word *psychology* has been used to refer to the study of the soul, consciousness, mental life, behaviour, human experience, the mind, or the brain, depending on the era and cultural context. *Psychological topics* have been studied in the Western tradition since the classical Greeks, for instance, when Aristotle in his pioneering work *On the Soul* discussed the topic *memory*. However, *psychology as an independent academic discipline* did not exist before the nineteenth century, and *psychology as a profession* became a social reality only in the twentieth century. The term *mainstream psychology* refers to an academic field of study as taught and researched in North American and European institutions such as universities.

A few key issues regarding mainstream psychology's implicit assumptions about its subject matter are discussed here. Some psychologists consider that the *most important models in psychology are technological ones and that the history of psychology parallels the development of technology*. For instance, cognitive psychology's model and metaphors of human mental life are based on the computer, whereas in earlier eras psychology made use of more basic mechanical devices (e.g., clocks, steam engines, and radios). Machine models are embedded within a network of ontological assumptions. One of these assumptions is that a person reacts towards an external stimulus like a mechanism; the machine model excludes notions of agency, the ability to
reflect, choose, and act. Other models in psychology include animal metaphors that, from a critical perspective, often neglect an understanding of how human mental life differs from various forms of animal mental life.

Thus, psychology's mainstream operates with a mechanistic, and hence an atomistic and reductionistic, model of human mental life. A mechanistic concept of human action is also apparent in biological traditions such as behaviourism. Despite a commitment to an evolutionary perspective by many behaviourists, the machine model is dominant in behaviourism because it is assumed that the individual responds to stimuli. Dividing psychological life into stimulus and response (behaviourism) or into independent and dependent variables (mainstream psychology) is problematic because it neglects subjectivity, agency, and meaningful reflection and action in concrete contexts (Holzkamp, 1992; Tolman and Maiers, 1991).

The selection of variables in the context of focusing on isolated aspects of human mental life (atomism) does not do justice to the integration of human mental life in concrete individuals. Instead of looking at the complexity of human life, which is the source of human subjectivity, the mainstream in psychology assumes that it is sufficient to study small parts. For instance, cognition is divided further into attention, thinking, and memory. Memory is divided further into long-term, short-term, etc. It is reductionistic to assume that the parts sufficiently explain the complexity of human subjectivity; yet, this is another consequence of the machine-model. In reality human subjectivity is experienced in its totality. From the perspective of the subject, cognition, emotion, and will (to use a Western division of mental life) are usually experienced in their connection in concrete life-situations and not as isolated parts. The idea that studying the parts of a whole is sufficient and that the parts will fit together into a meaningful whole through additive processes is based on a limited worldview. Parts do not just add up when it comes to human mental life. Critics have argued that a psychology that does justice to human subjectivity should begin with the nexus of human experiences in order to understand the parts and not vice versa (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003).

The machine-model of human mental life has another consequence: because it conceptualizes the person as individualistic and society as an external variable, the model sees the individual and society as separate (see also Parker & Spears, 1996). Seldom do psychologists realize that they base their theories and research practices regarding the mind on an individualistic concept. Consider the following: the fact that you speak a particular language, let's say English, has become part of your self. But of course, if you had been raised in Denmark with Danish parents, your language would be Danish. The passage of time also matters: you can produce unique sentences in English, sentences that have never been expressed before, yet these sentences are only meaningful because they are embedded within a sociohistorical trajectory. Because language changes, a sentence like 'I am reading a chapter on critical psychology that challenges the problematic nature of psychological ideas' would
have been incomprehensible to English-speaking persons living 500 years ago. Although language can be unique to an individual, it only makes sense within a larger community to which one has been socialized, a community that shares the linguistic properties of communication. Thus, it is insufficient to conceptualize the sociohistorical reality as a stimulus environment to which one reacts; the individual is not independent of the environment and vice versa. For contemporary psychology to be regarded as a scientific discipline it is crucial to represent human subjectivity as embedded in historical and social contexts.

In terms of alternatives, various forms of critical psychology have moved away from a mechanistic and individualistic concept of human mental life. All critical psychologies promote an understanding of the nature of human beings and of human mental life as active and societal. Cultural-historical approaches have argued that the environment, culture, and history are not just other variables. The context is interwoven with the very fabric of personal identity. For instance, Vygotsky (1978) and his followers have challenged psychology’s individualistic nature. One of his best-known alternative concepts is the zone of proximal development. It is based on the idea that testing an individual in isolation is limited and that it is more important to find out what an individual child can learn under the guidance of, and in collaboration with, peers and adults. For example, Vygotsky would be less interested in your individual performance in a multiple-choice test on research methods than in how you would solve a concrete research problem under the guidance of a mentor or in collaboration with other students.

Holzkamp attempted to develop basic categories for psychology in order to understand the specificities of human subjectivity. For him, subjectivity meant acknowledging the societal nature of human beings. Yet, conceptualizing the person as part of a larger sociohistorical and economic context did not mean that the subject should not be taken seriously. Holzkamp (1984) suggested that subjectivity and a psychology from the standpoint of the subject, which he conceived as the only viable psychology, should be understood literally. For example, it is conceivable that for an individual, drinking alcohol is the best option to deal with problems. If psychologists already know the outcome of a certain intervention, independent of the context and the individual, then they already have neglected the Other’s subjectivity. Of course, this does not imply agreeing with everything that the Other suggests and does.

Most feminist approaches recognize the nexus of person and society and emphasize the concept of subjectivity in context. In addition, they have suggested that a focus on the mental life means neglecting the body (see also phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). This means that embodied theories of subjectivity need to be developed, theories that do not exclude the body from psychological theorizing on the subject matter of psychology (Bayer & Malone, 1998). Social-constructionist thinkers have also provided conceptualizations of an individual that are not independent of his or her context but are embedded in society and community (Gergen, 1985).
Some hermeneutic oriented psychologists have emphasized the intentional, dialogical, and active side of a person (Richardson, Rogers, & McCarroll, 1998).

A postcolonial critique begins with the argument that the psychological subject matter is part of a wider historical and cultural context and the theories that try to capture this subject matter are part of Western theorizing. Thus, it must be understood as Western models of human mental life rather than universal ones (Teo & Febbraro, 2003). The question is how concepts developed in Europe and North America can be applied meaningfully to different cultural contexts. The task for psychologists from other countries is to find psychological theories, concepts, and practices that work in their life-worlds rather than importing or exporting American ideas. For instance, Freire (1970), who emphasized that learners should be treated as subjects and not as objects, and Martin-Baró (1994), who applied Freirean ideas to psychology, have developed categories dealing specifically with psychological issues in Latin America.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1976) divided the sciences into natural and human sciences. Following his lead, there has been increased discussion of the nature of concepts to describe humans and human mental life. Danziger (1997), who emphasized the social construction of psychological ideas and practices, addressed whether psychological concepts have a different status from natural-scientific concepts. He called this the difference between natural kinds and human kinds. Natural kinds are physical, chemical and biological objects and events and are arguably different from psychological categories: the study of water or a rock formation is different from the study of IQ, grief, or 'race'.

Psychologists need to understand that concepts in psychology are constructed in a specific cultural context for specific purposes. Mainstream psychologists often pretend that constructed concepts are natural concepts because they have empirical support. But empirical support says nothing about the ontological status of a concept. For instance, the fact that a certain number of individuals identify themselves as British does not mean that being British is a natural kind variable. Critical investigations emerged from the historical fact that certain psychological concepts have become a reality in social practice but their ontological status is completely problematic (for instance, 'race' or IQ). But these socially constructed concepts have become a central part of our identity: once the concept of IQ has been established and you do well on IQ tests, it becomes a part of your psychological self-understanding. Yet, at the same time psychological concepts such as IQ can also be understood as sources of power and oppression (see Foucault, 1966/1970; Rose, 1996).

Once a concept has become a cultural phenomenon, it is important to challenge the cultural familiarity of a specific concept and the socialization into this concept that makes many psychological ideas seem self-evident when, in fact, they are culturally embedded. The process of social construction is easy to understand when relatively new concepts such as emotional intelligence become part of our cultural self-understanding. Critical psychologists also
try to analyse whether these culturally embedded concepts used in psychological theories express a certain worldview and are ideological (that is, they may serve the interest of power and money). For instance, if we say that a behaviour is not adaptive instead of this person is alienated we have made a theoretical choice with consequences for specific persons (change the person or the environment). It is through its concepts that psychologists perceive sociopsychological reality.

**epistemological concerns and psychology's methodology**

In philosophy the term epistemology refers to the study of knowledge. In psychology we are interested in the nature of knowledge, the ways of achieving knowledge, and the meanings of knowledge and truth. Ontology and epistemology, although divided in this chapter for descriptive purposes, are in practice intertwined. Certain ontological assumptions and decisions about what psychologists should study have epistemological as well as methodological consequences. A commitment to a specific conceptualization of the subject matter implies specific methodological commitments and vice versa. For example, a machine-model of human mental life implies a mechanistic methodology, and the results based on this methodology seemingly support, but indeed are implied in, a machine-model (an example from everyday life: if one has a hammer, then one thinks that everything one sees needs to be hammered). This relationship between ontology and epistemology is not acknowledged in mainstream psychology and, thus, it is a problematic issue for the discipline.

From a critical perspective, one would demand that the specificities of an object or event (in psychology it would be mental life or subjectivity in context) demand and necessitate appropriate methodologies. It appears trivial to suggest that if researchers are interested in the biological basis of memory, then they are required to use a biological, natural-scientific methodology; however, if they are interested in studying the subjective meaningful content of memory, then they need a methodology that is able to do justice to this subject matter (for example, hermeneutic approaches that emphasize the understanding of meaning). However, the mainstream promotes the idea that a natural-scientific methodology can and must be applied unquestionably to all research areas. This assumption has its intellectual roots in positivism's physicalism, developed in the first half of the twentieth century, which suggested that everything in the empirical world could be studied with the concepts and methods of physics.

As taught at most universities in the world and expressed in most textbooks, psychology is committed to a natural-scientific, experimental-statistical or empirical-statistical methodology. It operationalizes most concepts as variables (independent, dependent, moderating, mediating).
Indeed, traditional psychology is a \textit{psychology of variables} (Holzkamp, 1991). From a historical point of view, one can reconstruct a shift from a science that was interested in the \textit{why} of psychological phenomena to the exploration of the \textit{functional relationship} between variables. For instance, psychologists do not study the \textit{why} of unemployment in a person's life, which would include an analysis of the problem as a sociohistorical issue. Instead mainstream psychology looks at the relationship between the variable of unemployment and other variables such as wellbeing, depression, self-esteem, personality, and so on. This functional relationship is understood in psychology, depending on the nature of the research design, as causal or correlational.

Typically, within the logic of mainstream psychological research, it has been suggested that psychologists should formulate hypotheses derived from theories (they are framed and understood within theoretical arguments); the hypotheses should be expressed as law-like statements (if–then); theories and methods should be formalized; hypotheses should be tested using objective, valid, and reliable observations and measurements; and, based on the results of hypothesis testing, psychologists can provide deductive-nomological (law-providing) or statistical models of explanation and prediction. Many mainstream psychologists consider the experiment to be the best or most effective means of gaining knowledge in the discipline. Within a quantitative \textit{methodology}, psychology has developed a variety of \textit{methods} (e.g., analysis of variance, factor analysis, path analysis, etc.).

Yet, as pointed out earlier, psychological topics such as memory can be studied from a natural-scientific perspective as well as from a human-scientific perspective. If one looks at memory's physiological basis, its functions, principles, and divisions, one is not necessarily interested in an individually developed memory in context, the very \textit{content} of memory. As clinical psychologists are well aware, a person's unique memory of past experiences that gives meaning to a person's identity and action is part of a cultural–historical trajectory and as such is the topic for a human-scientific perspective. From a disciplinary perspective one could argue that studying the meaning of memory is as important as researching the physiological basis of memory. Yet, the subjective dimension of human mental life and subjectivity in general have been neglected in psychology and excluded in the mainstream's ontology and thus do not find a way back into methodology. \textit{Qualitative} research that tends to focus on the content of human subjectivity is still very much marginalized in mainstream methodology.

Since Kuhn (1962), historians of science have emphasized the difference between what researchers are supposed to do and what they actually do. Critics such as Koch (1985) target the idea that psychology provides psychological laws by arguing that despite the discipline's natural-scientific orientation for over a hundred years, despite the hundreds of thousands of experiments, and despite the long accumulation of very technical writings, it would be difficult to find statements in psychology that could be counted as \textit{natural law} in the sense of the natural sciences or in the sense of being
universally valid. The fact that psychology fails as a law-providing science should give pause for reflection on whether the prevailing methodology does justice to the subject matter.

Yet, as pointed out earlier, certain ontological and methodological commitments cannot be resolved by looking at the discipline's internal shortcomings. Science is also a social enterprise and should be understood in the context of power, money, and prestige. The discipline that struggled with acceptance in academia and by the public would rather associate itself with the use of brass and steel instruments that had mechanical sophistication and were associated with science, adopt the white coats of scientists in labs, and rely on complex machines such as computers and fMRI machines. Of course, it was also important to suggest that psychological measures have the same status as physical measures. Critics of this approach suggest that the use of natural-scientific paraphernalia does not really make psychology a science even though it makes for a good pretence (see also Politzer, 1994).

The focus on methodology rather than on subject matter has led to an epistemological attitude that I call methodologism (Teo, 2005). This term refers to a research practice in which the subject matter is secondary but the method has primacy. Others have used similar terms: methodolatry (Bakan, 1967), the cult of empiricism (Toulmin & Leary, 1985), and the methodological imperative (Danziger, 1985). Methodologism means that the experimental-statistical or empirical-statistical methodology is applied to all research questions. Yet, if a methodology prescribes what psychologists can study, research is unnecessarily limited. Critical psychologists such as Holzkamp (1991) even argued that adequacy of the methodology with regard to the subject matter should be a central scientific criterion: as long as the adequacy of a methodology is not known, the scientific value and all other objectification criteria are worthless. To illustrate this point, consider the following: the best thermometer in the world is worthless for measuring speed.

Psychology's methodologism leads to a methodological theory of knowledge: instead of asking about the nature of knowledge in psychology, such as whether studies would be valid in a hundred years and valid in all cultures (which they should if we found causal relationships that can be generalized into a natural law), it is assumed that accepting and following the methodological and methodical rules outlined by the discipline, handed down and enhanced by succeeding generations of psychologists, will automatically lead to psychological knowledge. Such a methodological theory of knowledge also prevents critical questions about the purpose of research: What are the personal, social, and political-economic interests involved in executing a certain study? Who benefits from which results? Critical psychologists do not think that methodology is independent from the subject matter and independent from the sociohistorical context from which it emerges.

The methodologism of natural-scientific psychology leads to various sub-problems. From a critical as well as from a human-scientific perspective the experiment in psychology has limited value given the nature of
the psychological subject matter, which includes the agency of persons embedded in sociohistorical contexts. Even Wilhelm Wundt, still heralded as the father of modern experimental psychology, was aware of the experiment's limited value. Thus, he called for a psychology that includes the sociohistorical context and uses what we would call qualitative methods (see Danziger, 1990).

An experiment can only capture what goes into the theoretical and methodological framework. For instance, if I stand up as a participant (or 'subject') in an experiment and suggest that the task demanded of me does not make sense to me, I am excluded from the data as an error. Thus, my reaction – based on a legitimate concern – is excluded. The experiment needs the willing and well-behaved participant, but in social reality, humans can stand up and change the world, or at least, their life-worlds. This cannot be captured in an experiment. The experiment uses variables and looks at the functional (causal) relationship of isolated variables, but in the real world, all the factors that had been excluded in the experiment emerge and play a role in human action (Holzkamp, 1972). Thus, psychological studies often do not have practical relevance, let alone emancipatory relevance, which is a core issue for many critical psychologies. Emancipatory relevance means that research should contribute to overturning oppressive social situations.

There is a large literature regarding the critique of mainstream psychology's identity as a science that supposedly provides universal laws, explanations, and predictions. In addition, some critics have argued that psychology mistakes reasons for causes and that empirical hypothesis-testing is not a test but an application of good reasons (is your decision to study critical psychology caused or do you have reasons for it?) and that if-then-statements have implicative character (for some of these complex issues, see Smedslund, 1988). The discussion of mistaking reasons of humans for physical causes points to another important issue: psychology's hermeneutic deficit (see Teo, 2008). Because the mainstream excludes hermeneutic methods (methods that emphasize an understanding of human subjectivity), psychologists are often unaware of the problems that are related to what assumptions go into the establishment and interpretation of data. Interpretations impart meaning to data and make results understandable, for the authors themselves, for peers, and for a general audience and the mass media. Interpretations allow data to be understood better than they present themselves. The mainstream rhetoric of psychological 'facts' suggests that facts speak for themselves even when those 'facts' or 'empirical knowledge' contain data and interpretations.

This hermeneutic deficit becomes clear in the context of the interpretation of group differences (e.g., gender or 'race' differences). I suggest that epistemological violence is committed when the interpretation of data (not data themselves) leads to statements that construct marginalized groups as inferior, restrict the opportunities of marginalized groups, and lead to aversive recommendations for marginalized groups. For instance, if a researcher suggests that a gender difference in faculty positions at elite universities is due to the lower
ability of women, then this researcher has committed epistemological violence (because the data do not determine this interpretation, because alternative interpretations are available, and because this interpretation has negative consequences for women). Unfortunately, as described in more detail in other chapters, psychology has a long history of invalid interpretations of group differences regarding women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and people living on low incomes, among others.

In terms of alternatives, critical psychologists continue to use methodologies that strive to do justice to the subject matter, methodologies that capture the active, meaning-oriented, intentional nature of human mental life embedded in sociohistorical contexts. Some critical psychologists have incorporated psychoanalysis, the best-known approach that does not exclude subjectivity from research (see Parker, 2003). Critical researchers also emphasize the transformative potential of research: this means that research not only addresses the status quo but also provides knowledge on how to change it.

Although there exists no consistent methodology in the varieties of critical psychology, one can often find the idea that qualitative methods are more appropriate for understanding human subjectivity than quantitative methods. However, it is evident that certain issues should be addressed from a quantitative point of view, and even more, that quantitative methods can be critical and can challenge the status quo (see Martín-Baró, 1994). For example, if someone makes the argument that men interrupt women more often than vice versa, one can begin with a quantitative method in order to measure the frequency of interruptions by men and by women. Thus, quantitative methods are not inherently problematic because the usage of methods depends on the subject matter, the specific question or the particular issue. The problem is not the usage of quantitative methods; the problem is giving primacy to a natural-scientific methodology without looking at the 'object'. The limitations of a quantitative approach for many psychological issues have become the source of many alternatives.

Feminist researchers have identified the ideology of mainstream scientific methodology as male biased. In her classical studies, Keller (1985) explored the association between objectivity and masculinity and defended the thesis that scientific research was based on masculine discourses, ideals, metaphors, and practices. She argued that the emphasis on power and control, widespread in the rhetoric of Western science’s history, represented the projection of a male consciousness. The language of science expressed a preoccupation with dominance and an adversarial relationship to nature. She pointed out that science divided reality into two parts, the knower and the known, with an autonomous knower in control, distanced, and separated from the known. According to Keller, the masculine separation of scientist and subject matter opposed the feminine idea of connectedness and at the same time reinforced beliefs about the naturally masculine character of science. Instead, she suggested research that emphasizes a connection with the participant and does.
not exclude the participant’s authentic experiences. Obviously, qualitative methods are preferred within such a framework.

In cultural-historical approaches, when it comes to educational psychology, research on assessment, teaching, and learning has been understood as holistic. For example, in co-teaching models all stakeholders participate in the design of a curriculum as well as in the actual teaching practices (see Roth and Lee, 2007). Such a process provides a grounding of theories in praxis – a method that has been applied to social workers and other professions. According to German critical psychology, research should be able to capture the standpoint of the subject. This means, for instance, that in psychotherapy research how psychotherapy shapes a person is less interesting than how a person contributes to his or her own change (Dreier, 2007).

Social-constructionist or postmodern thinkers (the label may be problematic) such as Michel Foucault have inaugurated various methods of discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis, a method that focuses on the analysis of written or spoken language, understands language as a social practice that is infused with biases. This method operates based on the idea that language is often embedded in ideological, oppressive, or exploitative practices. Discourse analysis allows, for example, historical reconstructions of how the multiple personality was made into an object of academic discussion (Hacking, 1995) as well as the analysis of very specific discourses such as racist discourses (Van Dijk, 1993). Foucault (1977) also provided suggestions for an analysis of non-discursive practices: for instance, an analysis of prison architecture allows an insight into the workings of power in the context of human subjectivity and interpersonal relations.

In Martín-Baró’s (1994) approach, epistemology is intertwined with critical praxis. He suggests that psychology must base its knowledge production on the liberation needs of the oppressed people of Latin America. This means that knowledge must be generated by learning from the oppressed: research should look at psychosocial processes from the perspective of the dominated; educational psychology should learn from the perspective of the illiterate; industrial psychology should begin with the perspective of the unemployed; clinical psychology should be guided by the perspective of the marginalized. What does mental health mean from the perspective of someone who lives in a town dump? Martín-Baró suggests an epistemological change from the powerful to the oppressed and recommends participatory action research (see below). It must be mentioned that feminist, sociohistorical, postmodern and postcolonial ideas can be integrated into a meaningful methodology of the oppressed (Sandoval, 2000).

**Ethical-political concerns and psychology’s praxis**

Psychological practice is interconnected with epistemology and ontology. If one assumes that humans act like machines, then practice will emphasize...
control, manipulation, and technologies. If one conceptualizes humans as meaning-making agents embedded in sociopolitical contexts, then practice will call attention to human action and agency. I will focus here on one issue: the emphasis on control and adaptation neglects psychology's emancipatory potential. Psychology has been an extremely successful discipline in Europe and North America in terms of academic and professional expansion. However, success does not necessarily imply the ethical-political quality of its practice. Psychological practice has often involved abuses perpetrated by the powerful, from intelligence testing as a means to control immigration into the United States (see Chapter 2 and Gould, 1981) to applying psychological techniques to extract information from suspected terrorists (see Chapter 23).

Although it is difficult to make generalizations and to identify an underlying tenet, mainstream psychologists in the past and present have emphasized that fact (what is) and value (what ought to be) are two different domains that should be kept apart. The problem is that, in any social science, these two domains are inherently intertwined. Even in natural science, as environmental issues such as global warming show, the effect of human activity on the environment is not just a fact but something that has implications for action. Critical psychologists challenge the mainstream idea that one cannot derive ought from is, and that science should remain neutral on political issues and concerns. Instead, most ethical-political critical psychologists emphasize that we should derive ought from is. For instance, if research shows the negative effects of poverty on mental life, then poverty should be targeted and in the end abolished; psychologists should participate in its abolition. In terms of social injustice in general (when it comes to class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, globalization, etc.), critical psychologists take up issues of inequality and make them a practical research concern.

Of course, in practice the mainstream is ambivalent about ethical-political issues because the separation of is and ought is not really maintained in professional organizations, and the public demands an ethical position on certain issues. The American Psychological Association, the Canadian Psychological Association, and many other professional organizations have adopted codes of ethics to which members submit. Obviously, values come into play when doing psychology (see I. Prilleltensky, 1994). From a Latin American point of view, Martín-Baró (1994) pointed out that an ethical-political stance and objectivity do not conflict with each other. For example, when it comes to torture it would be possible to be ethical (thus rejecting torture) while at the same time maintaining objectivity (understanding the objective consequences of torture on human mental life).

Foucault not only wrote about the prison system but also became active in the prison reform movement. This path relates to Karl Marx's famous notion of the primacy of praxis over theory: intellectual reflection should not be about interpreting the world so much as changing it. For Marx, the final goal of all praxis was changing society's fundamental economic foundations, which he perceived as the source of inequality. A member of the Frankfurt
School of critical theory, Max Horkheimer (1992) also pleaded for an end to the separation of value and research, knowledge and action, and the individual and society. Instead of denying that values guide research and instead of hiding interests, Horkheimer specifically laid out values to guide critical research: an organization of society to meet the needs of the whole community and to end social injustice. Critical social research should be guided by these ethical-political ideas and should generate knowledge that has emancipatory relevance.

Two things should be emphasized: mainstream psychology is also guided by certain values, beginning with the value of value-neutrality; and a lack of reflection on the values that guide one's research maintains the status quo. Critical psychologists have analysed psychology's role in maintaining capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and Western ideology (for instance, see Weisstein, 1993). In not challenging the mainstream, psychology reinforces the status quo, which also means performing psychology in the interest of the powerful. This embeddedness of psychology in the market economy has made it difficult to promote psychology as an emancipatory science. Even social psychology, which has a history of contributing to emancipation, has largely been transformed into a field that produces huge amounts of socially irrelevant data.

To make this argument about the mainstream's primarily adaptive praxis more transparent I would like to mention one example from psychotherapy. A psychologist can work in a therapeutic setting with gays and lesbians to make their homosexuality (seemingly) disappear. This was considered adaptive by some people at a particular point in time. On the other hand, working with such individuals on the transformation of personal attitudes and societal perspectives, a praxis that may include social action can be considered emancipatory. Rather than making homosexuality into a problem, psychotherapy should be about working on problems that homosexuals encounter in a particular society. An emancipatory praxis does not silence the needs and concerns of people suffering from societal prejudices.

In terms of alternatives, cultural-historical, Neo-Marxist, and other critical approaches in the West have acknowledged the primacy of praxis but have often remained in the comparably safe environment of academia. Thus, instead of becoming politically active outside the political mainstream, many critical theorists have suggested that research, if not emancipatory itself, should at least have an emancipatory intention (Habermas, 1972). In fact, in critical thought one can find ethical-political orientations that range from left-liberal progressive to radical. Many ivory tower critical psychologists also justify theoretical research as a legitimate option, because the production of knowledge is considered a form of praxis (as is teaching) that is not inferior to concrete community-based interventions in the abolition of social injustice.

Although Marxists, feminists, and social constructionists have developed ideas on the unity of theory and practice, the most obvious consequences
of praxis can be seen in economically less developed contexts where theorizing for the sake of theorizing and research for the sake of research must be considered indulgent practices given that lives and deaths are at stake. Again, Martín-Baró (1994) argues that it is insufficient to put ourselves in the shoes of oppressed people. Instead he pleads for a new praxis, which he defines as an activity that transforms social reality and lets us know not only about what is but also about what is not, and by which we may try to orient ourselves toward what ought to be. In consequence, the psychologist is less a traditional clinician and more a resource for the community regarding intervention and support in the fields of disability, mental health, and drug use and also in terms of economic development and anti-poverty programmes.

For Martín-Baró it is not so much that theory defines the problems but rather that the problems demand their own theorization. In consequence, he worked with victims of state oppression, assumed active social roles, and worked with marginalized groups as a collective. This allowed for an understanding of suffering as a shared issue rather than an individualized problem. His preferential option for the poor was influential in shaping his political–ethical ideas. The concrete praxis method that he used has been labelled participatory action research but he also believed it needed to be accompanied by an analysis of the history and social theory of oppression. Originally, action research was introduced to psychology by Kurt Lewin (1946) who, motivated by the unity of theory and praxis, believed in the transformative power of research in social psychology. This method of praxis allows for studying and changing a problem at the same time.

Certain fields in psychology lend themselves to practical interventions based on progressive ethical–political systems. For example, although not all parts of community psychology are emancipatory, some critical psychologists are associated with community psychology (see Prilleltensky and Nelson, 2002 and Chapters 8 and 22 in this volume). Concrete critical psychological praxis has also been addressed in the context of AIDS in Africa (Hook, 2004) and in Latin America in terms of various forms of liberation psychology (Montero and Christlieb, 2003).

current issues for critical psychology

Critical reflection and recognition that psychology is a problematic science should not be understood as a call to abandon psychology. Instead, it is an argument to transform psychology in a direction that does justice to the complexity of the subject matter, chooses methodologies for the particularities of mental life embedded in contexts, and develops ethically responsible practices and ideas that challenge the status quo. The future of psychology as well as of critical psychology depends on understanding that the world has become more interconnected. Despite the negative consequences of economic
globalization for many nations, groups, and individuals, opportunities present themselves for the theory and praxis of the discipline.

This opportunity can be described as internationalization (see Brock, 2006). It should be noted that this term connotes two opposing strategies: it could mean the propagation of Americanized psychology around the world; indeed internationalization traditionally meant the world-wide distribution of American psychology (or at best, cross-cultural studies based on a Western ontology and epistemology). But the term could also mean a move away from an American to a genuine global psychology. A global postcolonial psychology involves a process of assimilation, by which mainstream psychology incorporates non-Western concepts into the discipline, but more importantly, a process of accommodation, by which the very nature of psychology changes based on ideas from around the world. If one assumes that any local psychology (including American psychology) could learn from other local perspectives, then an international postcolonial psychology requires more than a process of incorporation.

The notion of internationalization is based on the idea that Western psychological concepts are neither universally applicable nor superior to concepts from other cultural contexts. In addition, Western psychology should pay attention, for instance, to the classical Indian concept of a fourth state of consciousness (reaching a non-dualistic, undivided, and unchanging Self through meditation; see Paranjpe, 1998) or to the concept of ubuntu (personhood is understood in relationship with others) in South African psychology (Mkhize, 2004).

Indeed, we all, including psychologists, have limited horizons, restricted psychological perspectives within which we develop our research and practice. Exposure to historically and culturally significant horizons that transcend our own point of view will allow the development of broader, deeper, and more sophisticated perspectives that address the significant problems of the discipline.

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**Main Chapter Points**

1. The various approaches to critical psychology can be studied along three philosophically distinctive, but in reality integrated, problem complexes: (a) ontological discussions include a critique of the subject matter of psychology; (b) epistemological concerns focus on the methodology of psychology; and (c) ethical-political frameworks challenge the practice of psychology.

2. These three problem areas are analysed in terms of accepted ideas in mainstream psychology, the critique of the mainstream, and alternatives developed in various critical psychologies.

3. Finally, some ideas on the future of critical psychology are presented.
glossary

- **epistemology**: the study of knowledge. Psychologists interested in epistemological questions discuss the discipline's adequate *methodology* (a general framework for studying psychological topics), *methods* (specific approaches for studying psychological issues), and their relationship to knowledge.

- **ethical–political concerns**: the dash emphasizes that ethical concerns are also political concerns and vice versa. In psychology those concerns influence the *praxis* of psychology. The term *praxis* is used in order to emphasize the ethical–political nature of all psychological practices.

- **ontology**: the study of *Being* in general. In psychology researchers in this area address the nature of the psychological subject matter (the 'object' of psychology), the nature of human mental life, human nature in general, and the nature of psychological categories.

reading suggestions

For an introductory overview of the various forms of critical psychology, I recommend the following books: Hook's (2004) textbook provides critical psychological theory and praxis from an African perspective; Tolman (1994) presents a good overview on the history and theory of Holzkamp's German critical psychology, of which not many works have been translated into English; Sloan (2000) includes the personal voices as well as the ideas of critical psychologists; Teo (2005) provides a historical and systematic reconstruction of the various critiques of psychology; Slife, Reber, and Richardson (2005) address critical thinking in psychology and its areas; and Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) explore critical praxis systematically.

internet resources

- **History and Philosophy of Psychology web resources**: www.psych.yorku.ca/orgs/resource/
- **History and Theory of Psychology Graduate Program – York University, Canada**: www.yorku.ca/health/psyc/graduate/ht_more_info.htm
- **Illuminations: The Critical Theory Project**: www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/illumina%20Folder/
- **International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP)**: psychology.ucalgary.ca/istp/
- **Kritische Psychologie – German critical psychology**: www.kritische-psychologie.de
Questions

1. What is the proper subject matter of psychology?

2. How would you conceptualize theoretically and practically the relationship between the individual and society?

3. Provide examples and, if possible, personal experiences of methodologism.

4. Discuss how ethical-political values influence psychological research and practices.

5. Discuss how theory and praxis are related.