

# Strange Bedfellows: Psychoanalytic Theory’s Place in Critical Psychology

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This special issue of *Awry: Journal of Critical Psychology* considers the value psychoanalytic theory has for the field of critical psychology by demonstrating how the field is already inherently critical of mainstream psychology. Critical psychology has become a growing discipline in recent years as many start to question the implicit values and assumptions latent in psychology, not to mention its standing within the scientific tradition. The replication crisis undermined the field’s scientific standing and the APA’s complicity in the torture of persons in the Abu Ghraib prison incited speculation about the use and purpose of certain psychological theories and tactics. Even prior to this, critical scholars, many of whom have been published in an earlier issue of *Awry*, have demonstrated the need to rethink the ways in which psychology conceptualizes the human subject, as well as decouple itself from neoliberal capitalist demands. Many of the contributors in this special issue argue that psychology’s largest offense is the reduction of the subject to neurochemical and cognitive behavioral contingencies. In doing so, contemporary psychology obfuscates or ignores many of the contextual and interpersonal circumstances that constitute the subject. The effect of this reductionism is a leveling of fundamental difference, and most importantly to those interested in psychoanalytic theory, a disavowal of the unconscious. The articles that make up this volume are diverse in their scope but posit the following assertions: psychology and its many tenets inherently support the status quo of neoliberal capitalism; psychoanalytic theory and its concepts implicitly undermine the ego reification projects central to mainstream psychology; and that psychoanalytic theory contains within it underutilized tools for theorizing about the political and social.

## 1 | PSYCHOLOGY & NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM

The field of traditional psychology has been critiqued at length by critical psychologists, as well as psychoanalytic thinkers. In particular, much has been said about psychology’s adherence to neoliberal ideology (Parker, 2007; Sugarman, 2015; Klein, 2016; Teo, 2018; Morris, O’Gwin, Grant McDonald, 2020; Sugarman Thrift, 2020). Psychology emphasizes a subject which can be worked on and manipulated for maximum efficacy, as well as understands the subject as a being unto itself- influenced, but not constituted by others and its context. In its current form, the discipline not only reifies hyper-individualism but contributes to a growing form of subjectivity constituted by a free market ideology. Arfken (2018) explains that “inhabitants of our current age increasingly carve out an existence that

reflects the beliefs and values of the financial-industrial complex" (p.1). Inherent to these values and beliefs is an emphasis on self-improvement and entrepreneurialism, in which human beings are reduced to their ability to be efficient, productive and ingenuitive.

In order to appreciate psychology's relationship to neoliberalism and the ways psychoanalysis can offer a counter-discourse, a historical framework is necessary. Roberts provides a thorough and comprehensive archaeology of the modes of subjectification a la Foucault to consider the Lacanian subject in light of a traumatic ethics. In doing so, he delineates the discourse of dissociation, which he argues is evident in many of the psy-disciplines' emphasis on the subject's disavowal of their alienation, in contrast to the discourse of repression, utilized in psychoanalysis, which encourages the subject to "embrace temporal destitution" (p.3). Using a Lacanian-Foucaultian framework, Roberts explicates how this discourse of repression challenges traditional psychology's self-improvement projects in favor of what he refers to as the politics of desire. Similarly, Bristow Titus explore the relationship psychoanalysis has had to materialism and the psy-complex and its wellness industries of neoliberal capitalism. In spirit with the historical approach, Bristow Titus advocate for a political psychology that utilizes and understands the radicality of the unconscious in order to challenge those approaches which emphasize locating the individual as the site of pathology under neoliberal capitalism. Both aforementioned articles articulate an understanding of psychoanalytic theory and practice as running counter to the growing egoic discourses of psychology, which emphasize the subject of cogito.

Other contributors to this issue note that it is psychology's turn away from Freud and psychoanalysis to more ego-centered projects that set the stage for the neoliberal project within contemporary psychology. Ramey Fleming, for example, suggest that we can see its origins in egoification of the subject within the humanistic tradition. Humanistic psychologists, in responding to what they believed to be a reductionism in psychoanalysis and behaviorism, emphasized individuation, self- actualization and wholeness. Using a psychoanalytic lens, Ramey Fleming suggest that this quest for wholeness easily lends itself to capitalist exploitation. Freud, and later Lacan, demonstrated time and again how the subject is constituted by an irreconcilable lack which motivates the subject to keep moving in search of his or her cause of desire. With its discourses of self-improvement and empowerment juxtaposed against the seemingly endless supply of products, apps, and tools to achieve said betterment, the contemporary psychological subject is emphasized and utilized towards a neoliberal capitalist end, and as exemplified in Roberts' aforementioned piece, further alienated.

The limitations of the knowable, and therefore manipulable, subject is further exemplified in approaches to address social issues, such as racism, sexism and transphobia. Much has been written recently on race from a psychoanalytic perspective with the recent publication of George and Hook's (2021) *Lacan and race: Racism, identity and psychoanalytic theory*. In particular, scholars have been exploring how racism is an unconscious problem, not easily addressed in recent diversity and inclusion initiatives. Here, psychoanalyst Stephanie Swales considers the way the emphasis on the subject who knows his or her motivations may actually lead to xenophobia. By exploring "the empathy cure" and the demand to "love thy neighbor," Swales suggests that the psychological cure for the hatred of the other fails to consider the ways the subject actually enjoys hating, thereby rendering it difficult to do away with. In assuming that one ought to simply love or care for the other, without exploring the unconscious investments one has to hating the other, empathy approaches exacerbate the problem of difference rather than contend with it. Robert Beshara in this issue also contends with issues of racism inherent in traditional psychological and psychoanalytic theory, arguing instead for a liberation psychoanalytic understanding the racialization of subjects. In Beshara's formulation, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is deployed alongside decolonial and dialectical theory in order to rethink the social order from which racism is inherited and to which subjects are tied, as demonstrated in Lacan's (1966/2006) now famous quote "the unconscious desire is the Other's desire" (p.528).

Some of the contributors to this volume focused on the ways certain ideologies play out in the realm of

the clinic. In their piece on enlightenment and psychoanalysis, Oliva, Lery-Lachaume Antonini elaborate on how a return to speech itself à la Lacan can be a critical praxis for challenging the neoliberal egoic trends within clinical psychology. They suggest that current clinical interventions which remain at the level of the ego are politically inert and reinforce a bourgeois ideological project. Moore also takes issue with the implicit normative ideology inherent in both psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic clinical writing about transgender patients. Moore suggests that much of the clinical literature seems to take Freud at his word when he wrote of the bedrock of biological difference. Doing so, Moore suggests, fails to see the confusion with which Freud himself struggled with notions of biology and its relationship to sexual difference. Instead, Moore uses LaPlanche to argue for a critical psychoanalytical perspective which allow the transgender person's speech to be meaningful unto itself and not reduced to prescribed understandings as so commonly done in the clinical literature. Clinical literature and its normative discourses are also of concern to Optaken-Ringdal as demonstrated in her included piece on the treatment of borderline patients in psychiatry and 20th century American psychoanalysis, which would become ego psychology. Optaken-Ringdal provides detailed clinical history to demonstrate how the combined effort of both disciplines to develop discrete diagnostic categories ended up creating a group of patients deemed difficult to treat and subsequently on the receiving end of coercion and disciplinary power. While both authors critique the ways in which psychoanalytic theory has been deployed in some clinics, they each articulate a concern about the implications of reducing human subjects to recognizable egos, demonstrating the institutional violence that can arise as a result.

With the recent global Coronavirus pandemic, there has also been ample opportunity to interpret trends in behavior that have heretofore been fringe or nonexistent. Once again, psychological explanations remain unsatisfactory. For example, in this issue Scacco Di Gianfrancesco challenge the dominant psychological narratives surrounding conspiracy theories, in particular those pertaining to the pandemic. They argue that much of the analyses of those invested in conspiracies tends to focus on personality traits, and subsequently disinvest the subject from the socio-political contingencies, reifying the idea of the subject in a vacuum. They demonstrate how psychoanalytic concepts, such as jouissance, provide a means through which to consider the paradoxical nature of many of the conspiracy theories circulating during the most recent global pandemic. Also in this issue, Arteaga and Bandinilli explore the notion of truth as it has been taken up during the pandemic using a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens. Using examples from discourse about the pandemic and "post-truth", they demonstrate the political investments in the signifier "science", following Lacan's (2006) assertion that "man's science does not exist, only its subject does (p.730). In his piece on cleanliness, Glazier follows this critique to investigate and interrogate how notions of cleanliness versus dirtiness have come to reinforce a certain biopower in the form of what he refers to as quarantine discourses. Instead, he argues, we ought to embrace Kristeva's notion of the politics of intimacy and see the potential "getting dirty" may have for establishing communion. In each of these pieces, the authors use extraordinary circumstance to concisely demonstrate how discourses which assume that the subject is the subject of conscious thought fail short because of their inability to acknowledge the role of the death drive, enjoyment or unconscious signifiers on the life of the subject. If we do this, then we quickly learn that "knowledge" produced about the subject, and not by the subject, is not enough.

## 2 | PSYCHOANALYSIS AS A CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Fundamental to Freud's discovery of the unconscious was the simple, yet disturbing, presumption that human subjects do not know why they do what they do. This is demonstrated in the frustrating repetition compulsions, curious symptoms with no biological determinants and obsessive preoccupations many analysts witness on their couches. Freud's

discovery has since been accused of being unscientific due to the inability to falsify his method or observations. The problem, of course, is that the charge of “unscientific” is regularly conflated with the term “discredited” and therefore, rendered interesting, but largely useless, according to most psychology textbooks. Curiously, the fact that Freud actually began his work as a neuroanatomist, in which he was concerned about lesion locations in aphasias, is often elided (Northoff, 2012). In fact, much of his early work on repression draws heavily on his training in neuroanatomy to create what he referred to as a sort of “psychology for neurologists” (Freud, 1985). This is the first evidence we have that Freud himself may have been a bit of a critical psychologist. His training led him to pursue a line of inquiry that he worried might be delusional at times (Freud, 1985) because he was encountering issues that both neurology and psychology at the time could not account for. Freud’s discovery of repression and its driving force in human behavior and thought introduced a confounding variable into the field of psychology that it has yet been able to reconcile with. In fact, most of the branches of psychology following Freud either acknowledged his profound contributions, as is the case with many of the humanistic psychotherapists, or had to outright bracket his insights, such as with the behaviorist and cognitivist turn.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Freud has been dismissed by many in psychology has to do with the fact that psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory undermines the implicit assumptions within psychology. As psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1955) states,

*What does analysis uncover – if it isn't the fundamental, radical discordance of forms of conduct essential to man in relation to everything which he experiences? The dimension discovered by analysis is the opposite of anything which progresses through adaptation, through approximation, through being perfected. It is something which proceeds by leaps, in jumps. It is always the strictly inadequate application of certain complete symbolic relations, and that implies several tonalities, immixtions, for instance of the imaginary in the symbolic, or inversely (pp. 85-86).*

As probably evident at this point, many of the contributors in this volume draw on the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. This is because Lacan was perhaps one of the most vocal of the post-Freudian analysts on his disfavor, and sometimes hostility, towards contemporary psychology. In fact, he asserted that the growing popularity of ego psychology resulted from calculated misreadings of Freud and that in grounding psychoanalytic theory in a Saussurian approach to language, he was maintaining the integrity and radical potential of Freudian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 2006). This relationship to Lacanian psychoanalysis and critical psychology is also not new and interested parties would likely find the work of Ian Parker or Derek Hook to be a comprehensive and eloquent exegesis on the ways in which the disciplines can benefit from one another.

While authors in this issue have written elsewhere about the opportunities for collaboration between the psychoanalysis and critical psychology, there remains many avenues still largely untapped. One way in is via Vogan's suggestion in this volume that those interested in avoiding the reductionistic trends in contemporary psychology can engage in a psychoanalytic hermeneutic, which values the subject's situatedness and relationality vis à vis the unconscious. Such an appreciation for philosophical engagement with the discipline of psychoanalysis is echoed in Chris Bell's interview with Dr. Luke S. Ogasawara, who uses Heidegger and Lacan to provide a cross-cultural appreciation of psychoanalytic thought in Japan. In each of these articles, as with many of the other pieces in this volume, the authors mine the potential psychoanalytic theory has to address contemporary concerns, many of which they argue have been exacerbated, not alleviated by 20th and 21st century psychology and psychiatry. Most importantly and argued decisively in this issue is that psychoanalysis uncovers a discordance, or split, within human subjects that cannot be easily identified. The subject is thus a mystery to his or herself, but also entrenched in contradiction. What is

called for then is not foregone conclusions about the relationship thoughts have to behaviors, but rather a thoughtful engagement with the speech of the subject that considers his or her idiosyncratic situatedness and meaning making capacities. This runs counter to the neoliberal capitalist injunctions to know thyself vis à vis commodities, brands, curated social media sites, etc. Instead, subjects are called to engage with their desire, as well as the ethics and politics of their desire, as constituted by a lack that cannot be addressed by the newest adaption-oriented therapy. Such an approach, used alongside the well-established critiques by critical psychologists, can elucidate the ways mainstream psychology's aims and directives may inherently, or explicitly, support the neoliberal capitalist status quo.

The contributors to the current volume are analysts, clinicians and scholars who, for a variety of reasons, have come to understand psychoanalytic theory as a useful approach to addressing contemporary concerns and modes of suffering. The perspectives here range from clinical to social to the philosophical, some within the same article. The contributors have sophisticatedly articulated the problems with contemporary psychology and psychological approaches to understanding mental and behavioral phenomena, while also elucidating the richness of psychoanalytic theory, so often elided or obfuscated in contemporary textbooks. In short, they demonstrate that the two disciplines' tradition of considering the human subject as embedded in discourse demonstrates that psychoanalytic theory and critical psychology may have always shared a clandestine allegiance.