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**Critical Psychology in Norway: A brief review commenting on why critical psychology is currently virtually absent<sup>2</sup>**

## **Introduction**

In this review article we will present a brief historical outline of critical psychology in Norway. Some reasons why Norwegian critical psychology is currently virtually absent will be given. Finally, a review of critical voices that can nevertheless be heard will be presented. First, however, we will briefly outline what is implied by critical psychology in this review as the word 'critical' is being used in a variety of different ways. In academic contexts 'critical' is definitely a word of honor. Nobody wants to be characterized as uncritical, naïve, non-reflected, or whatever the opposite (antonym) of critical is taken to be. Naturally, it is not this common sense meaning of the word 'critical' we have in mind when we review critical psychology in Norway. Frankly, we have met several critical psychologists who are naïve indeed. (Not to speak about all the mainstream psychologists we have met who are naïve in their belief in the neutrality of science.)

## **Definition**

Our core criterion for categorizing any psychology as critical, is that psychology – research and/or practice – is deliberately being used in an attempt to influence and change society; in order to create a better society, a better world. According to this definition, therefore, a critical psychologist is involved in societal issues adopting psychology in his or her striving for a more just society characterized by less social and economic inequality. Such an enterprise may be undertaken in a variety of different ways: by trying to influence and change society at large; by community psychology; by focusing on special sectors, parts or aspects of society such as gender roles; by counteracting devastating developmental trends in society such as the currently predominant neo-liberalism and free market ideology; by transforming the academic psychological discipline itself into an ecologically more relevant discipline; etc. Thus, a critical psychologist is a psychologist who tries to use his or her psychological knowledge to contribute to a just and sustainable society, to adhere to the overarching definition of critical psychology presented in Fox & Prilleltensky's (1997) by now classical introduction to critical psychology.

## **Historical trends**

In the decades following WWII, psychology in general and social psychology in particular were established in Norway as critical disciplines aiming at resolving societal problems. With funding from the so-called Marshall Fund, various social science disciplines – among them

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social psychology – were established as modern research oriented disciplines at the Institutt for Samfunnsforskning (Institute of Social Research). Resolution of real societal problems in the post WWII Norwegian society set the agenda for research. Pioneers in this clearly critical psychology orientation at that time included Harriet Holter, Per Olav Tiller and Einar Thorsrud. Holter (1966) undertook societal level research of the oppression of women in the post WWII Norwegian society. Tiller (1969, 1973) adopted the ecological metaphor and demonstrated how macro factors such as working life and gender roles strongly influenced children's social and personality development. In the organizational field, action research and employee participation in the workplace was advocated by Thorsrud (see e.g., Thorsrud & Emery, 1970). For a review of this embryonic period of Norwegian social psychology, see Nafstad and Blakar (1982)<sup>3</sup>. The critical enthusiasm of the post-war period, however, faded, and conditions of 'normal' mainstream science emerged.

Another critical phase took place in the 1970's when psychology, as the other social sciences, was radicalized due to the international ideological movements often associated with 1968 and the students' revolts. Whereas the critical attitude of the postwar period expressed a deeply felt need to develop a psychology enabling the creation of a better society and in particular avoid new wars, the critical attitude of the seventies reflected much more a kind of superficial lip service to specific political ideologies. Partly as a reaction to the politicized seventies, psychology in Norway during the 1980's and 1990's was striving towards the ideals of hard, 'neutral'<sup>4</sup> science, leaving no or little space for critical psychology.

### **Conditions for critical psychology**

To understand why critical psychology is currently flourishing in some regions (e.g., Latin America) while being virtually absent in other (e.g., Norway), two conditions in particular are of relevance. First and foremost, to what extent is unjust, inequality or other deficiencies in society experienced to represent urgent challenges for individual and communal wellbeing? Secondly, to what extent is critical psychology accepted and appreciated within the discipline itself?

Thus, to explain why critical psychology is virtually absent in Norway in the new millennium, some information must first be given about the present societal and ideological situation in Norway as well as the situation within Norwegian psychology. Firstly, the plea as well as the need for critical psychology in Norway - a small, rich, stable, democratic Western society heavily based on the traditional Scandinavian welfare model - is naturally less than in many or most other countries.

Secondly, of all the various psychological sub-disciplines, community psychology is likely to be the one most strongly associated with critical psychology. However, in their review of Norwegian community psychology, Carlquist et al. (in press) conclude that by a stringent definition of community psychology work, no or little community psychology is being undertaken in Norway. This general conclusion is elaborated and modified in ways that is very informative with regard to the above asserted absence of critical psychology: "... many Norwegian psychologists across a wide scope of fields integrate and adopt CP principles in their work. *Yet, the critical and political nature of CP has been absent.*" (Carlquist et al., in

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<sup>3</sup> For a review of current social psychology in Norway, see Ommundsen & Teigen, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of critical psychology, all psychology, not only critical psychology, is value laden. Thus it represents an ethical imperative for every psychology to explicate its value basis and tacit assumptions (Nafstad, 2003b, 2005).

press). This situation is explained by the authors on the basis of the socio-cultural and political conditions in Norway. And Carlquist et al. (in press) continue: “The ideals of social justice and security, empowerment and community participation have been cornerstones in the development of the Norwegian welfare state. *CP-oriented psychologists in Norway have more or less tacitly taken for granted that they are part of a larger system or process – the welfare society - characterized by fairness and social justice.*” (Italics added).

With explicit reference to ongoing ideological shifts and changes globally as well as in the Norwegian society towards a more neo-liberalist ideology favouring the free market model, Carlquist et al. (in press), however, argue that there is less reason now to take this assumption for granted. And they conclude that: “... in the years to come community psychology in Norway 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.” During the first years of the new millennium moreover, there has been undertaken a series of analyses exposing the radically increasing influence and predominance of neo-liberalist ideology and the free market model within the traditional Norwegian welfare state (see the review below).

With regard to the second condition, the situation within Norwegian psychology, during the past decades the hegemony of Norwegian psychology has shifted markedly away from a social, towards a more genetic-biological, neurological and cognitive science of psychology. This shift of hegemony within the discipline itself has resulted in less optimal conditions for critical psychology. This currently predominant mainstream scientific ideology within the discipline was clearly revealed in a recent nation wide evaluation of Norwegian psychological research. Evaluating the research that was conducted by one of the universities’ social psychology and community psychology units, the national evaluation panel claimed that the research involvement of this unit differed from what was to be expected by scientific research in that “The group did not appear to place the focus on hypothesis testing, but rather thinks of research as *a way to improve society.*” (RCN, 2004, p. 33, italics added). Obviously, this mainstream-based panel evaluating current Norwegian research in psychology did not accept that research also has critical aims as that of changing society. The very idea that research could be conceived of as “*a way to improve society*” seemed far-fetched, even unacceptable to the national evaluation panel.

The above quotation from the mainstream-based national evaluation panel is telling indeed about the transformations of Norwegian psychology during the last half century: Being (re-)established in the post-war period as a critical social science aiming at creating a better and more just society, psychology is now conceived of merely as a neutral procedure for producing psychological knowledge; knowledge being established within increasingly more narrowly defined sub-disciplines (Nafstad, 2003b, 2005).

Moreover, the neo-liberalist ideology predominant all over the (Western) world has become strongly influential also in the traditional Norwegian welfare society during the last two decades (Nafstad et al., 2006, in press). This ideology does not pave the way for critical sciences. Quite to the contrary, the predominant neo-liberalist free market ideology represents a hindrance for funding critical research.

Vitality and flourishing of critical psychology in a region or country is dependent on people’s general political, economic and social conditions and wellbeing. The fact that critical psychology is flourishing in Latin America (cf. the special issue of *International Journal of*

*Critical Psychology* about Latin America in 2003) but virtually absent in Norway, we therefore contend, is mainly due to the huge differences between the two societies or regions. In discussing the vitality and special nature of critical psychology in Latin America, Montero & Christlieb (2003) in their Editorial to this special issue maintain that "... there is also a Latin American Social Psychology, which, ... is a social-political-community psychology of liberation, *born out of the critical standing assumed by many Latin American psychologists facing the social-political-economic conditions suffered by as much as sixty or eighty percent of the population.* So when speaking of Latin American Social Psychology, it is almost redundant to say that it is critical psychology. If it really is Latin American, it cannot be otherwise ..." (p. 8, italics added).

### **Current critical psychology in Norway**

Even though critical psychology is not, as now underlined, flourishing in Norway, a critical and emancipatory voice has not become totally silent. It is almost impossible to get an overview of the diverse and widespread critical applied and clinical practice. Therefore, the present review is restricted to academic institutions and research in psychology<sup>5</sup>. (For a review of community psychology in Norway, see Carlquist et al., in press.)

Of the critical work initiated in the late 1960's-early 1970's, there is continuous activity within two areas: First, feminist psychology has since the late sixties represented a strong critical force with emancipatory aims (Holter, 1966, 1970). Feminist psychology in Norway, with roots back to the post-war period, flourished strongly during the seventies, and represents still a strong, outspoken critical voice (Holter, 1984; Haavind, 1984, 1998, 2002; Ås, 1975). Second, the psychology of language was turned into a discipline critically examining society and societal values as reflected in language. In particular, power relations within society were exposed by means of analyses of language usage (Blakar, 1973, 1979). Empowered with the analytical capabilities that modern electronically archived media language in huge databases offer this analytical tradition has recently been revitalized. The aim is to map out ongoing transformations of the traditional Norwegian welfare society driven by neo-liberalism reflected in language usage in the public discourse (Nafstad & Blakar, 2002, 2006). Moreover, these two traditions have time and again merged, in that critical studies of language and communication have been used to expose gender roles (Ås, 1975; Blakar, 1975; Blakar & Pedersen, 1984).

Feminist psychology, almost by definition critical and emancipatory, is currently represented in various Norwegian research institutions, most strongly at the University of Oslo (Andenæs, 2005; Guldbrandsen, 2002; Haavind, 1998, 2002; Haavind & Magnusson, 2005a, 2005b; Rudberg & Bjerrum Nielsen, 2005). Apart from feminist psychology, critical and emancipatory psychology aiming at changing society is, as underlined above, currently scarce in Norway. However, during the last decade newer strands of critical psychology have evolved.

At the University of Bergen Norman Anderssen, Tor-Johan Ekeland, Marit Netland and collaborators have adopted critical and discourse analytical approaches to several areas: the regulatory causes and effects of sexual categories and sexual citizenship (Anderssen, 2001, 2002; Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002); political violence assessment procedures and trauma research (Netland, 2001; 2002; 2005); development and life course of Palestinians

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<sup>5</sup> Even though Norway is a relatively small country, it is not unlikely that there is research going on within critical psychology that we are not aware of.

living under Israeli occupation (Netland, 2005); epistemological traditions and practical consequences within Norwegian psychiatry (Bergem & Ekeland, 2004; Ekeland, 1999, 2004). At the University of Trondheim, Arnulf Kolstad and collaborators have been undertaking critical psychology within the field of work life and organizations (Kolstad et al., 1995, 1996; Kolstad, 2005), and they have demonstrated how psychological knowledge often is used to cover up, rather than uncover, health-threatening conditions in working life.

At the University of Oslo Hilde E. Nafstad, Rolv M. Blakar and collaborators have critically analyzed societal ideologies and ideological shifts as reflected in media language of public discourse during the last two decades. In particular, they have mapped out how neo-liberalism with its free market model has imbued ever new sectors of this traditional Scandinavian welfare state (Nafstad, 2003a, Nafstad et al., 2006, in press). Moreover, they have analyzed how minorities are tacitly represented on the premises of the majority (Nafstad, 1986; Nafstad et al., 2005). And Finn Tschudi and collaborators are doing very interesting and creative work on conferencing; often considered an alternative to conventional retributive legal action or clinical therapy (Tschudi & Reichelt, 2004).

### **Concluding remarks**

Given the aim of creating a better society characterized by equality, care and social justice, critical analysis of societal ideologies by definition constitutes a core enterprise of critical psychology (Carlquist, 2005; Nafstad, 2003a). In conclusion, a few more general comments on such ideology analyses will therefore be presented: First, it may seem paradoxical, but those forces in society that hinder critical research, may in fact also initiate and stimulate critical research. In this case, the strong societal influences of neo-liberalism and free market mechanisms, a hindrance for critical research, have itself been made the issue of critical scrutiny. Second, critical analysis of societal ideologies and ideological shifts in society inevitably entails a reflective component, in that one is forced to reflect upon implicit values and tacit assumptions which carry ideological and ethical implications in our own discipline: psychology (Anderssen, 2001; Haavind, 1998; Nafstad, 2003a, b, 2005). Finally, such analysis of societal ideologies invites, one might even say, forces psychology to interdisciplinary cooperation. We, the authors of the present review, have found cooperation with social and moral philosophy (Vetlesen, 2004, 2005) particularly sharpening for our critical perspective within psychology.

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<sup>6</sup> To appear in German in *Systeme* (in press).

<sup>7</sup> A revised and elaborated version of this article will appear in Italian in *Passaggi* (in press).