

20 theses on psychology and neoliberalism: from mainstream psychology to critical psychology

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Abstract

In this article, we present and discuss 20 theses to characterize the relationship between psychology and neoliberalism on the one hand, and neoliberal psychology and society on the other. These theses consist of three overarching themes which are psychology education, clinical and counseling psychology in practice, and the psychological profile of the neoliberal subject. With regard to psychology education, our discussion revolves on privatization of psychology degrees, commodification of higher education, quantity fetishism, studying to get rich, double-edged popularization of psychology, customerization of psychology education, clinical chauvinism, and packaged and pacified psychology. Under the title of clinical and counseling psychology in practice, factory models of psychological services, financialization of success, privatized life-long training, psychologization of the social and political, neoliberal psychology as the guardian of status quo, fake psychologists, and the claim of universality are presented and discussed. Finally, under the theme of the psychological profile of the neoliberal subject, we develop our arguments with reference to precarization of the population, inherent depression in neoliberalism, debt psychology, artificial needs and permanent dissatisfaction, marketing, persuasion and psychology. However, this article does not recommend to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We recognize and appreciate critical voices within and outside of psychology. An anti-capitalist psychology will be the alternative to neoliberal psychology with an eye to alternatives to neoliberal capitalism.

Introduction

Scholarly discussions on the effects of neoliberalism over psychology is rare (Sugarman, 2015). Bal and Doci (2008) are surprised to see that the role of neoliberalism is often neglected even in the field of work and organizational psychology (WOP) which is expected to be directly affected by neoliberal policies as will be discussed below. For them, the influence of neoliberalism over WOP has two dimensions: It affects work settings as well as the WOP research. As a starting point for our paper, Coombes and Morgan (2015:445) propose that:

[N]eoliberalism can be regarded as a contemporary capitalist ideology widely practiced by many Western governments through policies that construe citizens as participants in a marketplace where they're free to choose, consume, and innovate while taking personal responsibility for their self-care, self-determination, and efficiency and remaining autonomous, adaptive, and flexible.

According to Winston (2018), "despite differences along this spectrum, neoliberals were united in emphasizing property rights, competitive free markets for all goods and services, lower taxes, deregulation and privatization, and the evils of unions" (p.602) and "despite diversity and animosity across the neoliberal spectrum, there remains a common and deeply held theme regarding human differences: economic inequality is a necessary state of nature" (p.612). Fryer and Rosembe (2014:244) remind us that:

Neoliberal fiscal austerity policies decrease public expenditure through cuts to central and local government budgets, welfare services and benefits and privatisation of public resources resulting in job losses.

Under neoliberal capitalism, from a Marxist point of view, the reserve army of labor, and from a more generic view, unemployment is used as the sword of Damocles. In fact, the bourgeoisie and his governments never want to eliminate unemployment. They want to keep the unemployment rate at a certain range. If it is too low, the employers will lose power; if it is too high, it may lead to social crisis which can be manifested as mass protests, riots and even revolutions. Fryer and Rosembe (2014:247) summarize the benefits of non-elimination of unemployment for the ruling classes:

Unemployment

- provides a pool of potential workers unable to be unwilling to do the most boring, dirty, dead end, menial, underpaid, temporary, insecure, stressful jobs;
- provides consumers of substandard products and services which would otherwise be 'wasted';
- provides competition for jobs from desperate job seekers allowing employers to drive down wages and working conditions;
- acts as an incomes policy ensuring lower wages, allowing bigger dividends and more investment.

Bay-Cheng et al. (2015) develop a neoliberal beliefs inventory from a psychological point of view. From their perspective, "neoliberalism commonly refers to global and domestic economic and social policies that expand and enrich capital markets while curbing governments' regulatory and social welfare systems" (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015:71). They identified 4 dimensions of the neoliberal ideology which involve system inequality, competition, personal wherewithal and government interference. Beliefs on system inequality are measured by items such as "affirmative action is an outdated policy now that people are generally treated as equals" or "people who complain about discrimination are often just blaming other people for their own problems." For the competition dimension, an example is

“being competitive is part of human nature.” Statements such as “a person’s success in life is determined more by his or her personal efforts than by society” refer to the third dimension (personal wherewithal). Finally, two sample statements for the fourth dimension (government interference) are “a problem with government social programs is that they get in the way of personal freedom” and “the government does not have a right to take what I earn and give it to someone else”. In this vein, Reveley (2016:2) proposes that “among neoliberalism’s ideological correlates are personal autonomy, self-reliance, and responsibility for one’s own well-being.”

After this brief introduction to neoliberalism, we can move to our 20 theses on psychology and neoliberalism.

Theses on psychology and neoliberalism

Psychology education

1. Privatization of psychology degrees: A typical phenomenon under neoliberal capitalism is the privatization of higher education institutions which brings a higher number of students paying to become psychologists. Some of them can afford it, thus it bolsters class inequality; while some others can’t pay it, and so they are indebted which stifles rights movements in graduates’ future professional lives.

2. Commodification of higher education: Factory profit maximization models are applied to psychology degree awarding departments. A higher number of students matches a lower number of faculty. Precarization of faculty is becoming the norm with a sharp increase in the proportion of part-timers and adjuncts among the academic labor force.¹

3. Quantity fetishism: In psychology education, quantity reigns supreme over quality.² We have a higher number of students, a higher number of psychology programs which are disproportionately offered by private education providers. Certain areas of psychology such as experimental psychology are disinvested as they are considered to be costly compared to the number of students who would like to specialize in these ‘esoteric’ areas and revenues earned over them.

4. Studying to get rich: Neoliberal universities not only commodifies education, but also expect student-customers to commodify their degree and profession as a graduate outcome. Individualism rather than social values and private profit instead of public interest are celebrated. Thus customer-students are expected to study psychology to get rich rather than for any humane motives.³

¹ Olivier (2015:14) adds that “under the neoliberal regime many universities are run more like businesses than as institutions of higher learning by a ruthless cohort of managers, with dire results for the health of academic staff.” Thus academic precarization has implications for faculty health as well.

² On the other hand, Parker (2014:250) argues that “the university as an institution has been subject to neoliberal reforms, with an intensification of surveillance and control at the same time as there is an intensification of interest in individual subjectivity. A concern with ‘quantity’ in research is now augmented by an attention to ‘quality’ in the service of power, something which is described by management as part of a ‘change agenda’.”

³ For a content analyses attesting the rise of individualism and acceptance of social inequalities coupled with neoliberalism respectively see Nafstadt et al., 2009; 2007. For the effects of neoliberalism on clinical psychology training see Dudley, 2017. Mulya (2016:1) in this context states that “such discourses [i.e. neoliberal discourses] (re)produce psychology students, graduates, and lecturers who are competitive, result-oriented, and market-driven. Consequently, democratic, humane, and organic ways of learning and practicing psychology

5. Double-edged popularization of psychology: Under neoliberal capitalism an extremely keen interest in psychology by the public is quite common, as psychological problems are the norms rather than exceptions under capitalism. The private institutions have no difficulty in finding ‘customers’ for their departments. High demand brings oversupply, which means anybody willing to study psychology with a high school degree can get a psychology degree, as long as s/he can afford it. Psychology education is a profitable business for private higher education institutions which can overcharge the degree based on its popularity compared to other degree programs.

6. Customerization of psychology education: Rather than a collegiate approach to psychology students, a customer model is preferred, with customer satisfaction as the key to the success of a degree program. The quality of the education accordingly deteriorates, as student customers have not only the chance to complain about the difficulty of a course or toughness of the faculty, but also the spoiled power to remove the course or even the faculty from the program.

7. Clinical chauvinism: Clinical psychology is considered to be superior to the other areas of psychology, as it is considered to offer higher salaries for graduates. Psychologists in private practice charge exorbitant fees for their ‘customers’. However, because of the oversupply of psychology graduates, this rosy picture is changing. Not all the graduates can afford to open a clinic; thus they work in other sectors with low salaries and precarious conditions due to the reserve army of unemployed psychology graduates.

8. Packaged and pacified psychology: Psychology courses, as in the case of other departmental courses, are mostly standardized and offered in a package which hinders student and faculty improvisation, creativity and critical thinking skills.

Clinical and counseling psychology in practice

9. Factory models of psychological services: Clinical and counseling psychology practice is mostly privatized. Public hospitals and other public providers of psychological services are overcrowded. In this public institutions, neoliberal principles have already been applied which means psychologists have extremely limited time allotted for each ‘patient’ such as 15 minutes and even 5 minutes in certain cases. Again and again, under pressure of performance systems, they are forced to meet a set of targets, as if where they work is a bank or a manufacturing base.⁴ As a result, they provide low quality services, which direct ‘patients’/customers to private practitioners. But since the latter overcharges, many of the patients can’t get any treatment. In his neoliberal system, only a fraction of people with psychological problems can receive appropriate psychological support. In his neoliberal system, only a fraction of people with psychological problems can receive appropriate psychological support.

have given way to more mechanistic, standardised, and box-ticking approaches to human behaviour.” In the same vein, Pulfrey and Butera (2013), based on their empirical study, conclude that neoliberal values lead to cheating in higher education.

⁴ Ferraro (2016:18) argues that “the history of psychology in the neoliberal era is a history of the predominance of short-term, standardized treatments and of a return to Taylorism, exemplified by CBT”; and “contemporary psychotherapy is, overall, a cheaper, more quantitative, more standardized, and more coercive endeavour than that which existed before the neoliberal era” (p. 19).

10. Financialization of success: In private practice the success indicator of a psychologist is financialized. If you make more money, you are considered to be more successful.⁵

11. Privatized life-long training: Private practice is privatized twice, as continuous professional trainings are overcharging psychologists to update them about the recent advances in the area.

12. Psychologization of the social and political: Neoliberal psychology in clinical and counseling practice aggressively claims that the problem is within the individual. Even some of the anti-capitalist approaches are hooked by this bait, when they say “revolution starts in the individual”. However, society is more than sum of the individuals. For one thing, societies not only consist of individuals, but also organized entities at various levels. Neoliberal psychology champions an atomized version of the individuals.⁶ The psychological problem you have is your problem, it is not due to the society or the capitalist system. Thus, neoliberal cure is not about changing the society or the system, but changing yourself. If you can’t change your conditions, you have to adapt to these conditions. This mentality is reasonable if it is really true that the conditions we have are immutable, but in fact in all the cases there are ways to change our conditions. Thus, when neoliberal psychology advises to change your perception while it is possible to change your conditions, this is obviously ideological. Neoliberal focus on individual change or change in perception rather than society at large serves an ideological function.⁷ Rather than questioning the social injustices that are the root causes of certain psychological problems, the people are misdirected to look inwards. Neoliberal psychology psychologizes even obviously socially originated problems such as poverty.⁸ This psychologization process individualizes the matters to the exclusion of other likely explanations based on other disciplines such as sociology and politics.⁹ Neoliberal psychology is often inclined to blame the victims of social, political and economic injustices.¹⁰ This psychologization often goes hand in hand with medicalization whereby medical models of psychological disorders are imposed

⁵ In this context, Szulewicz (2018:8)’s view is noteworthy: “with the neoliberal context of employment, the risk of corrosion of professional identity among psychologists is more present than ever. As other professions, psychologists are expected to make ‘customers’ happy by offering the best possible service delivery and as a consequence our professional identities easily become more fluid.”

⁶ This atomization is also what is expected from people at work settings. Unionization is avoided, at best hoped to be marginalized among the workers. The expected, internalized message is the following: “if I have a job-related problem, it is my problem. There is nothing wrong about the company or capitalism. It is my responsibility to keep my job. If I lose my job when others are keeping their jobs, it is because something is wrong about me.” In that sense, pro-neoliberal inner voices can be connected to cognitive behavioral therapy approaches without any difficulty and attribution theories in social psychology. Attributions of poverty and injustices serve ideological functions often ignored by mainstream attribution research. For a critical view on the mainstream research about attributions of poverty see Harper, 2003. Likewise, Thomas (2016:5) states that “this idea that personal failings are the primary determinants of poverty is central to neoliberal ideology.”

⁷ In that sense, Olivier (2015:18) argues that “instead of addressing the root of the problem – the neoliberal organization of societies – individuals’ attention is conveniently diverted to themselves as being responsible for their failures and feelings of inadequacy.”

⁸ In this context, let us note what Madsen and Brinkmann (2010:180) say about psychologization: “Psychologisation implies that moral, political or social categories are willingly, or unwillingly, reduced or transformed into questions of psychological factors (e.g. well-being or self-development).”

⁹ The York Statement on Poverty declared by a group of British community psychologists follows similar lines: “We believe mainstream psychology to be complicit with the prevailing psychologically toxic neo-liberal economic order and believe psychology has allowed itself to be used to hide systemic effects of poverty and inequality and instead position poverty as a consequence of individual psychological dysfunction” (Burton, Kagan, Duckett, 2012:3).

¹⁰ For the link between psychology and perpetuation of social injustices see Arfken and Yen, 2014.

rather than social models, and pathologization whereby especially due to the distortions and manipulations of pharmaceutical and insurance companies, even ‘normal’ behaviors are considered as pathological.¹¹

13. Neoliberal psychology as the guardian of status quo: Neoliberal psychology in clinical and counseling practice is a staunch supporter of the status quo.¹² According to this account, there can’t be alternatives to capitalism. There may be problems associated with capitalism, but this does not change the fact that capitalism is the only viable option for society. We can reform the system, if needed.

14. Fake psychologists: Due to deregulation of psychological services as a consequence of neoliberal policies, fake psychologists and psychological con men/women are very common under neoliberal capitalism. That is due to the high demand for psychological services unmatched by supply.

15. The claim of universality: Neoliberal psychology imposes globally-Western, White, male, patriarchal, colonial, cultural theories and models as if they are universally true and applicable.¹³

Psychological profile of the neoliberal subject

16. Precarization of the population: Neoliberalism involves deregulation of the labor market and privatization of the public sectors. In public sectors historically the employees had longer and more secure contracts. But by the increasing rates of deregulation and privatization, a

¹¹ Bhatia and Priya (2018:661-662) aptly explain that “given neoliberalism’s emphasis on individual enterprise, happiness and achievement, mental health breakdown, or mental health trauma resulting from the breakdown of the social welfare system and loss of community bonds is often treated in terms of individual pathologies and disease.” For medicalization and pathologization processes under neoliberal capitalism, see Esposito and Perez, 2014; for a gendered account of medicalization see Liebert, 2010. A second meaning of pathologization refers to misinterpreting social behaviors exclusively on the basis of psychopathological categories. However, application of individual pathological terms to social groups and societies are usually laden with theoretical and practical problems that pathologizing views have ignored. For example, the term ‘paranoid society’ can only be metaphorical and not literal as the society performs its functions uninterrupted unlike a paranoid individual who can’t manage his/her daily life. Furthermore, what is considered to be ‘abnormal’ for a society usually serves social and political functions. For instance, one can consider racism as a pathology, but in fact it is functional for the societies. Additionally, if a society would be considered as psychologically sick, its members will not be held responsible for social misdeeds such as racism. Thus, pathologization harbors serious theoretical and practical problems from the very beginning, nevertheless it is common among mainstream clinical psychology discussions (Gezgin, 2017).

¹² Ferraro (2016:17) proposes that “neoliberalism is already internal to contemporary practices in the psych-disciplines (i.e., psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, etc.), functioning as an entrenched and constitutive element of their aims, ideology, use of evidence, and material effects.”

¹³ Winston (2018) takes note of the resurgence of academic theories of racism coupled with the rise of neoliberalism although the relationship is less straightforward than expected. For neoliberalism and racism, see Salter and Adams, 2013. For a critical feminist account of the relationship between psychology and neoliberalism see Rutherford, 2018. For a critical discussion of the links among psychology, neoliberalism and gender identities see Richardson, 2005. For an interesting and comprehensive account of the colonial dimensions of neoliberalism in Indian context, see Bhatia and Priya, 2018. Finally, for a set of cross-cultural objections to ‘the medicalization of human suffering’ see Summerfield, 2004.

higher proportion of citizens is precarized. This precarization brings out feelings of insecurity and future anxiety. As a result, anxiety disorders are getting more common.¹⁴

17. *Inherent depression in neoliberalism:* Depression is more common under neoliberal regimes. Although depression can be due to personal and family reasons, a remarkable proportion of the cases are attributable to professional and social alienation experienced by the working classes. Professional alienation in both blue collar and white collar settings is due to the fact, I work whole day so that bourgeoisie can get rich. I am precarized as well, which means I can be fired anytime the managers or bosses want.¹⁵ Majority of the citizens come from low income settings in various countries. So they have no option other than working for others. Thus sooner or later, the jobs become meaningless, people don't want to wake up in the morning for a job that they don't feel attached to. That is how certain cases of depression start.

18. *Debt psychology:* Neoliberalism is characterized by debt economy. People borrow enormous sums of money either for higher education, housing or cars. Consumption society is considered to be the key to the survival of capitalism, as George Bush's first post-9/11 speech testifies. Credit cards not only guarantee the revival of the economy but also obedience of citizens as they won't feel free enough to object to social inequalities when they are under heavy financial burdens.¹⁶

19. *Artificial needs and permanent dissatisfaction:* Neoliberalism coupled with consumerism creates artificial and transitory needs deliberately associated with positive outcomes. An average consumer buy so many products that s/he will use only once maybe. The products (especially electronic products) are produced in a way to disable any attempt to upgrade already bought products, we are rather forced to buy new products. So the typical consumer/citizen of neoliberalism is full of unsatisfied needs which bring continuous unhappiness.¹⁷ This surprisingly breeds institutionalized age-old religions, new age religions as well as alternative healing movements such as yoga, meditation and mindfulness training.¹⁸

¹⁴ However let us note that the relationship between precarity and anxiety is not direct, it is rather mediated by perceptions. There are individual differences in that sense. Otherwise, all the precarious people would have anxiety problems. Neilson (2015:184) attributes these differences to denial: "Circumstantial precarity correlates with anxiety, but the relationship is complex because people often quell anxiety by denying precarity." In other words, although precariously employed in reality, some of the people assume that they have more permanent and stable jobs which distances them away from anxiety. We can also interpret this situation as a self-serving and other-serving bias at the same time. It is self-serving as it protects the people from anxiety disorders; and it is other-serving as it contributes to survival and re-production of neoliberal regime of precarity.

¹⁵ A concise and useful characterization of this precarity under neoliberal capitalism is provided by Sugarman (2015:106): "The neoliberal context of employment is perpetually transitional. It demands and exploits a workforce that is global, disembedded, mobile, and flexible. In many sectors, lifelong vocations are being replaced by job portfolios composed of short-term projects and contracts."

¹⁶ For debt psychology, see Vavvos and Triliva, 2018; Walker, 2011; and Walker et al., 2014. For a psychological discussion of the consumption metaphor under capitalism see Gil-Juárez, 2010.

¹⁷ Among the psychological disorders, neoliberal capitalism and consumerism are usually associated with anxiety disorders and depression. However, other researchers add to this discussion narcissism as well. McDonald, Wearing and Ponting (2013:2) argue that "this process [the neoliberal construction of individual] creates narcissistic identities, which attempt to defend the self against the degradation of work in neoliberal societies, and where anxiety, emptiness and isolation are converted into pleasure and healing through leisure consumerism." Another strand of research focuses on how neoliberal capitalism leads to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders through the thin body image and physical beauty images for females and the muscular

20. Marketing, persuasion and psychology: Another key to neoliberal capitalism is marketing.¹⁹ Capitalism roughly sells 2 kinds of products: low-cost products and differentiated products. Low-cost products such as bread, rice, dairy items etc. are not highly profitable; however differentiated products such as mobile phones are highly profitable. This profitability is not due to the cost or quality, it is due to the marketing budget. The companies should convince the consumer-citizens that it is reasonable to pay high price (with high added profit margins) for certain kinds of products although cheaper substitutes are available. This is a matter of persuasion and attitude change which are among the main themes studied by psychology. Thus, capitalism needs psychologists to convince consumer-citizens.

Conclusion

Capitalism uses neoliberal psychology to maintain status quo by misdirecting people to look inwards rather than outwards and needs psychology to convince consumer-citizens. In both cases, the mainstream psychology is sine qua non for the survival of neoliberal capitalism. So it is no surprise that psychology is as sinister as neoliberalism. That is because it fits neoliberalism like a glove.

However, we are in no position to throw psychology into the ash heap of history altogether. Although disproportionately weaker than the mainstream, there are various alternative, heterodox and critical versions of psychology.²⁰ While there are no benevolent forms of neoliberalism, there are in psychology. So the problem is not about psychology itself but amplifying the dissenting voices within and outside of psychology. Neoliberalism is not without alternatives either. An alternative psychology should be open to alternatives to neoliberal capitalism.

body image for males. Likewise, it is no surprise that cosmetics is a major industry under neoliberal capitalism. See Stuart and Donaghue, 2012; and Tischner and Malson, 2011. On the other hand, unhealthy food advertisements and consumption patterns under neoliberal capitalism leads to higher prevalence of obesity (see Monaghan, Bombak and Rich, 2018). So the neoliberal message about our bodies appears to be mixed at first blush. In fact, the message is “eat all, but don’t gain weight”. This is exactly the source of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. One can object that all these are due to capitalism in general and not neoliberal capitalism in particular. However, deregulation of advertising, marketing, food and health industries are very much typical of neoliberalism in the name of leisure and entertainment.

¹⁸ With a similar view, Kinnvall (2004:741) states that “the globalization of economics, politics, and human affairs has made individuals and groups more ontologically insecure and existentially uncertain. One main response to such insecurity is to seek reaffirmation of one’s self identity by drawing closer to any collective that is perceived as being able to reduce insecurity and existential anxiety. The combination of religion and nationalism is a particularly powerful response (“identity-signifier”) in times of rapid change and uncertain futures, and is therefore more likely than other identity constructions to arise during crises of ontological insecurity.” Reveley (2016) further claims that neoliberal versions of mindfulness training medicalizes people. For marketization and consumerization of Buddhism and the notion of mindfulness see Cohen, 2017.

¹⁹ We can also add advertisement to our discussion as mentioned by Sugarman (2015:107): “Psychologists’ extensive participation in branding and advertising provides ample illustration of collusion with neoliberal governmentality.”

²⁰ A highly extensive sample of critical psychology approaches are portrayed in Parker (2015). For liberation psychology as an alternative to neoliberal psychology see Burton and Kagan, 2009 and Mario and Osorio, 2009. For Marxist psychology see Gezgin, 2018. For a politically engaged community psychology see Burton, Kagan, Duckett, 2012.

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