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Neoliberalism and Psychological Subdisciplines: a Reformulation of Personhood Disseminated by Theories and Practices

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Neoliberalism and Psychological Subdisciplines: A Reformulation
of Personhood Disseminated by Theories and Practices

by

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Abstract

The goal of this thesis was to examine how neoliberalism has impacted psychological practice. A literature review was conducted to identify intradisciplinary research published focusing on neoliberalism in relation to psychology. The identified literature emerged primarily among four subdisciplines of psychology including positive, developmental, educational, and social psychology. Two themes originated throughout the entirety of the subdisciplines research within the literature review: 1) how neoliberalism has interacted within the development of psychological subdisciplines or their psychological theories and practices 2) how the resulting impacts of these interactions are reformulating our personhood. It is concluded that psychologists within these four major subdisciplines are perpetuating the dissemination of neoliberal governmentality resulting in practical, ethical, and ontological implications of neoliberalism's impact on psychological practices. Two potentially influential factors contributing to neoliberalism's impact on psychology are offered. The first being an outdated epistemological framework built to ignore moral and political debates in the name of forging value neutral credibility under the guise of scientific objectivity. The second is a difficulty surrounding what kind of phenomenon the term neoliberalism refers to resulting in an equally difficult issue to discuss its psychological correlates and consequences.

Introduction

Mainstream psychology is a notably powerful discipline wielding considerable social influence over public opinion and behavior (De Vos, 2012). Considering its

influence, it is important to interrogate the potential sociopolitical influences that might undermine the integrity of its theories and potentially impact countless lives through its practices. Despite notable research conducted on neoliberalism as an object of study among economists, political scientists, and sociologists, within the field of psychology such research is almost entirely nonexistent. This is of particular concern to psychology given the expanding literature within social sciences demonstrating neoliberalism's harmful, pervasive, and influential nature (Harvey 2005 & Brown 2006).

The goal of this thesis is to examine how neoliberalism has impacted psychological practice. In what follows, the interrogation of intradisciplinary research exploring psychology's complex relationship to neoliberalism is presented. What little research exists documenting psychology's relationship to neoliberalism is specified to various subdisciplines within the field. It is hoped that the collective examination of literature psychology has to offer regarding its relationship to neoliberalism will build on the subdisciplines' specific critiques emphasizing its consideration for further research. With no such collective examination previously conducted among this discourse community, emphasis is placed on parsing out major themes that collectively surface.

Before proceeding it is important to define neoliberalism. The following section introduces neoliberalism and discusses elements of its relationship with a focus on self-identity. It provides a conceptual basis for the analysis and discussion in the subsequent sections of the paper. After establishing this conceptual framework, a method for the literature review is established. The literature itself, separated by psychological subdisciplines, is individually examined beginning with how neoliberalism has interacted within the development of the psychological subdisciplines or their psychological

theories and practices before discussing how the resulting impact of these interactions are reformulating our personhood.

A discussion is then presented reviewing the collective themes that emerged between the examined literature. Interwoven into this discussion is an exploration of practical, ethical, and ontological implications of neoliberalism's impact on psychological practices. The resulting inquiry brings into question how and why neoliberalism has had such a dramatic effect shaping psychological sciences. The concluding remarks offer potentially influential factors contributing to neoliberalism's impact on psychology and demonstrate the need for further examination within the psychological community.

Neoliberalism and Identity

The advent of neoliberalism in the closing decades of the 20th century marked the overthrow of Keynesian welfare state economics by the Chicago School of political economy. Neoliberalism is a loosely defined capitalist ideology that informs the policies of many contemporary Western governments, positioning citizens primarily as entrepreneurs and consumers. Generally speaking, neoliberalism shares many features with conservatism. Although its philosophical roots reach back to the beginning of the 20th century, neoliberal ideology has shaped policies at the international, national, and local level since ushered in Thatcherism and Reganomics. The key features of neoliberalism are a radically free market in which 'competition is maximized,' free trade achieved through economic deregulation, privatization of public assets, vastly diminished state responsibility over areas of social welfare, the corporatization of human services,

and monetary and social policies congenial to corporations (Brown, 2006). As these features demonstrate, neoliberalism dictates free markets are regarded as the most efficient mechanism for distributing resources based on individual needs and desires.

Herein lies perhaps the most treacherous aspect of neoliberalism. Because societies require people to do and be certain kinds of things, the institutionalizing of market values under neoliberalism extends socio-politically creating a new relationship between the economic well-being of the state and individuals (“subjects”). It assumes that by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms through the collective internalization of market values like self-interest, self-reliance, and competitive social relations results in prosperity for all (Harvey, 2005). This product of neoliberalism can also be understood as a form of governmentality – a way of reconfiguring selves and the social order in accord with the demands of market economies (Cromby and Willis 2014). The term governmentality, invented by Foucault in his landmark lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics*, describes the features and functions of sociopolitical institutions that shape and regulate the attitudes and conduct of individuals (Foucault, 2008).

In other words, governmentality links political power to subjectivity. In this way neoliberal governmentality functions by shifting the regulatory competence of the state onto individual consumers and in turn individuals are forced to conform situating themselves under duress in relation to its power instituting a new form of subjectivity. By making their subjectivity a target of influence, neoliberal governmentality operates beyond the state into the individual level producing a kind of self-regulatory narrative of self-responsibility, freedom, and moral autonomy shifting social provisions from the external government towards self-governance. Neoliberal governmentality transforms

citizens into entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care' - their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions (Brown, 2006).

Methodology

A literature review was conducted to evaluate neoliberalism's impact on psychology.

"Neoliberalism, psychology" was searched as a single term, combined with "governmentality," as well as with "social justice" within two search engines: PsycINFO and Google Scholar. This search produced results from four different areas of study that have most examined the relationship between psychology and neoliberalism within the discipline. These subdisciplines are positive, developmental, educational, and social psychology. The four most comprehensive reviews, three books and an article, published from 2009 and onward that explicitly discuss neoliberalism in relation their respective subdisciplines were included. Articles not originally written in English, or outside of these subdisciplines were excluded. Throughout the entirety of the literature review all publications related to the two emerging themes of: 1) How neoliberalism has interacted within the development of psychological subdisciplines or their psychological theories and practices, and 2) how the resulting impact of these interactions are reformulating our personhood.

Findings

Positive Psychology

In *Happiness as enterprise: An essay on neoliberal life*, Binkley (2014) goes into tremendous detail outlining the broad psychological initiative that reenvisions and promotes happiness, better known as Positive Psychology. The impact of positive psychology can now be demonstrated beyond its effects within the field of psychology. Its multibillion dollar field of research is commanding attention across society from education and economics to sports coaching and law enforcement. Through laborious delineation of positive psychologies development, Binkley illuminates how the influence of a new discourse on happiness delivered by positive psychology strongly reflects and sustains neoliberalism and enterprise culture. The influence of neoliberalism on Positive Psychology's foundations is exemplified in how its notion of 'happiness as enterprise' can be illustrated as the neoliberal approach to organizational structures and functions in terms of individual well-being. Developed from positive psychology's new discourse on happiness, 'happiness as an enterprise' is a reconfiguration of the concept of happiness from a state of being into a commodified life resource to be used for self-optimization whose potential resides at the disposal of an autonomous an enterprising individual.

Through positive psychology's transformation of the core concept of happiness Binkley asserts it is altering the way in which we see life and our relation to it, from the social and mutual to the entrepreneurial and opportunistic. By Binkley's analysis, positive psychology's relationship to neoliberal governmentality is formulating our understanding of relationships in the context of enterprise culture. In doing so, the applied lens of this new discourse results in a development of life viewed though a

dynamic field of potentials and opportunities. A conception of self in which happiness is presented not as a state of being, but rather as a goal and capitalistic enterprise to be realized through a strategic program of emotional well-being akin to neoliberalisms emphasis on ‘self-care.’

Developmental Psychology

An extensive critique of Western psychological expertise in development interventions is formulated in *Developing Minds Psychology, neoliberalism and power* (Klein, 2016). Klein’s critical examination distinguishes Western psychological expertise as a technology of furthering hegemony and prevailing logics within development, where Western psychological expertise is a technology to reproduce particular processes of power and control akin to neoliberal governmentality. This argument emerged through the authors insights investigating developmental psychology the following ways: 1) reviewing how developmental psychology is defined, much of Western psychological knowledge does not consider relations of power – namely neoliberal governmentality 2) tracing how developmental psychological expertise rose alongside neoliberalism in Western modernity it becomes clear that developmental psychological expertise is a parochial Western concept 3) due to the inherent politics of knowledge within developmental psychology, the importance of situating the use of psychological knowledge in broader processes of hegemony and ideology is virtually unexamined. As detailed above, that the broad canon of developmental psychological expertise as a product of neoliberal modernity has been largely accepted into development practice without much hesitation or scrutiny.

Embedded in these conclusions presented by Klein is a double-critique extending into the role developmental psychological expertise has played in how subjectivities and agency are constructed to fit in with broader regimes of power such as neoliberal governmentality. Given the history of the development intervention, and its increasing focus on individual agency in development, the impact of developmental psychology has become more and more influential. Of particular note is how developmental psychological expertise has been used to develop individual efficiency, self-regulation and free choice under what are becoming understood as neoliberal subjectivities. There are many ways subjectivities are targeted using developmental psychological expertise in contemporary development interventions. Three examples Klein highlights are: 1) behavioralization of policy – where behavioral economics borrowing from the psychological cannon to give legitimacy to its human behavior claims, is used to augment and shape subjectivities towards economic ends, 2) developmental psychological expertise in contemporary development interventions is the use of child psychological development as a way to imprint national development priorities, and 3) happiness and subjective well-being, has also increasingly become a focus of development interventions with similar concerns as from positive psychology. These are examples of how developmental psychological expertise is deployed as a ‘technology’ within the development industries, reshaping the character towards neoliberal ends.

Educational Psychology

In *The Education of Selves: How Psychology Transformed Students*, Martin and McLellan (2013) trace the historical influence of educational psychologists on views of

learners and curricula. Martin and McLellan outline how over the latter half of the 20th century, the expertise of educational psychologists have contributed to shifting the goals of schools molding them towards producing forms of subjectivity suitable to neoliberal governmentality. According to Martin and McLellan, the voluminous literature of psychological theorizing and research advanced by educational psychology, and incorporated by many American, Canadian, and European school policies and practices has drastically altered the image of a successful student. The former educational aims concerned with the values of committed citizenship, civic virtue, and the greater collective good have been supplanted by the mission of educational psychologists to help learners acquire skills, abilities, and dispositions that make them adaptive workers equipped psychologically to meet the ever-changing demands of neoliberal flexible capitalism.

The demonstrated influence of neoliberalism interactions with educational psychology and the resulting effects delineated in the setting of educational values, aims, and practices also interacts influencing the constitution of students as particular kinds of persons. Through promoting particular kinds of selfhood and techniques by which they are developed and attained, educational psychologists are ultimately reformulating our personhood. Martin and McLellan assert that a resulting consequence of the kinds of selfhood promoted by educational psychology is that they deter us from recognizing and acknowledging our social, cultural, and historical constitution. In other words, our selfhood is thrust towards a narrowed perception of one's inner psychological life. The results of which is an overly simplified recognition of our identity. A reformulation of

our self-conception befitting to neoliberalism hyper-focused on individualized autonomous moral and ethical values and standards.

Social Psychology

Utilizing a macrosocial perspective, the article *Social Psychology, Consumer Culture and Neoliberal Political Economy* further critiques from experimental social psychology that argue its individualistic ontology and positivist epistemology constrain its ability to look beyond the individual to understand how psychological processes are influenced by societal institutions and their power relations (McDonald, Gough, Wearing, & Deville, 2017). Through thorough critical analyzation of neoliberalism's relation to social psychology the authors provide a number of important insights into social psychological theories of self-identity and their related concepts. The authors marshal arguments and mount evidence depicting how elements of neoliberalism interstate with social psychological concepts of self-identify illustrated by the commodification of self-identity, social categories, culture and power relations, and the governing of self-regulating consumers. The authors present many examples of how social theories of neoliberalism intersect with experimental social psychological through its concepts of: 1) Personality which can be seen in the privileging of certain personality traits in the labor market, 2) Self-regulation and its individualization in the experimental social psychology literature that fits within the ethos of self-identity promoted by neoliberal economic policies, 3) Self-regulation theory fits with neoliberal policies of self-governance that view psychopathology as an issue for the individual to negotiate as opposed to a political and economic problem, 4) Social psychology overlooks the relations of power that people

are subjected to in neoliberal consumer cultures, and 5) unwittingly colludes with consumer culture by producing research which is used to develop more effective techniques to promote lifestyles and values based on consumption.

The evidentiary archive establishes a strong critique that experimental social psychology has become subsumed in the process of neoliberal governmentality. Perhaps what is most disconcerting in their analysis is the implication from its subsumption that the rules for what counts as knowledge about self-identity are structured by its power relations, which individualize political and economic problems. Social psychology can be seen affecting our self-identity reinforcing an identity in line with neoliberal governmentality. An identity personhood reconstituted as a consumer achieved through discourses that promote self-interest, self-reliance and competitive social relations.

Discussion

In analyzing the collective literature reviewed, two key patterns demonstrated how neoliberalism has impacted psychological practice. One such key pattern established is how neoliberalism has interacted within the development of psychological subdisciplines affecting their psychological theories and practices. This was something consistently demonstrated in the throughout the research. Binkley (2014) tracked neoliberalism's influence to the very most foundational frameworks positive psychology development from. Optimized by correlating how the central concept 'happiness as an enterprise' to their new discourse on happiness is virtually synonymous with the neoliberalism's enterprise culture commodification of individuals. Similarly, Klein (2016) distinguished developmental psychological expertise as a product of neoliberal

modernity. Namely seen in lacking a consideration of power relations and developmental psychological expertise's expansion towards the prevailing logics of neoliberalism as they developed together. Martin and McLellan (2013) assert an even greater influence of neoliberalism is illustrated in the voluminous literature of psychological theorizing and research advanced by educational psychology over the latter half of the 20th century. An influence of neoliberalism on educational psychological expertise that shifted the former educational aims of schools molding learners towards acquiring skills, abilities, and dispositions suitable to neoliberal governmentality for the demands of neoliberal flexible capitalism. Lastly, McDonald (2017) marshals arguments and mount evidence depicting how neoliberalism interstates with the social psychological concepts of self-identify illustrated by the commodification of self-identity, social categories, culture and power relations, and the governing of self-regulating consumers.

Perhaps the most interesting result of neoliberalism's interactions within the development of psychological subdisciplines is the how psychological theories and practices shaped by neoliberalism reformulated our personhood. This second key pattern remained across each resource reviewed. Through positive psychology's transformation of the core concept of happiness Binkley (2014) asserts it is altering the way in which we see life and our relation to it, from the social and mutual to the entrepreneurial and opportunistic. By Binkley's analysis, positive psychology's relationship to neoliberal governmentality is formulating our understanding of relationships in the context of enterprise culture. From the perspective of Klein (2016), neoliberal influenced developmental psychological expertise has played a role played into how subjectivities and agency are constructed fitting in with broader regimes of power such as neoliberal

governmentality. More specifically, that developmental psychological expertise has been used to develop individual efficiency, self-regulation and free choice under what are becoming understood as neoliberal governmentality. In the same way, Martin and McLellan (2013) assert that a resulting consequence of the kinds of selfhood promoted by educational psychology is a reformulation of our self-conception befitting to neoliberalism. This is claimed to be established from neoliberalism interactions with educational psychology altering the delineated in the setting of educational values to focus on individualized autonomous moral and ethical values and standards. The same is true for McDonald's (2017) critique that the rules for what counts as knowledge about self-identity formed by experimental social psychology and impacted by neoliberalism are structured by its power relations individualizing political and economic problems reconstituting self-identity in line with neoliberal governmentality.

All of these analyses exhibit how neoliberalism has interacted within the development of psychological subdisciplines or their psychological theories and practices and the subsequent impact of these interactions reformulating our personhood. Following these arguments, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that psychologists within these four major subdisciplines are perpetuating the dissemination of neoliberal governmentality, even if unwittingly. Furthermore, if the same criticisms can be established between four mainstream psychological subdisciplines, what consequences exist unexamined by the various other psychological disciplines and psychology as a whole? The evidentiary archive presented from these four massive subdisciplines in psychology offer ample evidence that many psychologists are functioning as conduits helping to perpetuated the globally dominant neoliberal agenda. In some ways by taking into consideration the

expansive research documenting neoliberalism's harmful, pervasive, and influential nature within neighboring sciences of economic, political, and sociological study this should not be too surprising. Still the question remains as to how and why neoliberalism has had such a dramatic effect shaping psychological sciences the development of psychological theories and practices to the reformulated of our very personhood?

Conclusion

Given the considerable power of social influence that mainstream psychology wields over public opinion and behavior it easy to understand how psychology can accelerate the dissemination of ideologies regardless of their helpfulness or capacity to harm. One possible answer to this is not a new critique of psychology. Some have long noted the hypocrisy that psychologists have been guilty of in a 'generalized avoidance' of the most significant moral and political debates of recent decades, for to do so would undermine a credibility forged on what is claimed to be value neutrality presumed to be ensured by scientific objectivity and moral indifference to its subject matter (Gergen, 2001; Prilleltensky, 1994). Hiding behind a veneer of scientism and pseudoimmunity to ideological influences have historically lead to psychologists at large preserving the status quo of sociopolitical climate as (Walsh-Bowers, 2007). Consequently, mainstream psychology has become culturally hegemonic in that the ideas of the dominant classes tend to be the dominant ideas (Bauman, 2000).

Considering this argument of mainstream psychology's outdated epistemological framework provides one possible solution to neoliberalism impact on psychological practice. Its uncritical acceptance of dominant ideologies (neoliberalism) maintains and

disseminates a series of understandings and practices regarding the individual (neoliberal governmentality). However, an outdated epistemological framework is not the only possible answer to this question. Another possible contributing factor is concerning the expansive definition of neoliberalism itself. Some authors have noted lack of agreement concerning what kind of phenomenon the term neoliberalism refers to (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009; Ferguson 2010). As previously mentioned, neoliberalism is primarily observed as a term in discourse opposing the aforementioned ideas, policies, and practices. This complex conceptual situation presents a challenge for psychology with the possibility of a vague, all-encompassing, and uncritically politicized concept may be detrimental if it is imprecisely employed to explain the many ills of contemporary society. Carlquist and Phelps (2014) note:

“Because it is hard to precisely pin down exactly what kind of phenomenon the term refers to, it is equally difficult to discuss its psychological correlates and consequences. A challenge for critical psychologists is thus to be more conceptually precise when referring to neoliberalism. Such increased clarity may allow for more focused discussions on how neoliberal ideas and practices concretely infiltrate, shape, and are shaped by individuals and communities and the consequences this may have.”

The two potential influences presented combined with the historically understudied influence of neoliberalism by psychologist offer some insight to the findings of neoliberalism’s dramatic effect shaping areas of psychological sciences from

the development of psychological theories and practices to the reformulated of our very personhood. The profound practical, ethical, and ontological implication of neoliberalism's impacted on psychological practices that have been demonstrated raise more questions than answers. Future research is needed beyond these subdisciplines to assess the true extent neoliberalism has permeated psychology.

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