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Psychologization and psychology
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see also: The 'psy complex' revisited: The psychologization of culture and the case of psychoanalysis

My own usage of the term 'psychologization' since the mid-seventies has been influenced primarily by Foucault-inspired authors such as Robert Castel and Jacques Donzelot, and also, but somewhat less, by American authors, such as Joel Kovel and Christopher Lasch. The term and conception behind it ('psychological techniques are used as tools of power, resulting in the de-politization of social issues') and even more the analyses going with them, replaced in my thinking the rather crude marxist critique of 'bourgeois psychology'.

For an impression of the critical climate in the contemporary student movement, I present you with a quote from a journal from the movement:

Industrial psychology contributes to the exploitation of labourers by developing methods to boost production. At the same time, the psychology of human relations tries to compensate by creating a 'good working atmosphere' for the otherwise oppressed employees. Social and developmental psychology claim to improve human relations and child development, but in fact are used mainly to adjust people to the harsh and inhuman demands that are inevitably connected with capitalist society. And clinical psychologists, instead of investigating the social causes of mental disorder and stress, for the most part limit themselves to the patching up of fellow human beings driven crazy by the system.

This was written 25 years ago, history indeed!

Politically, statements like these were not very helpful, since they implied no real invitation to open discussion for 'bourgeois' psychologists, to say the least. Psychologists, whatever their good intentions, were seen as no more than the henchmen of capital. Apart from the strategic weaknesses, these indictments also failed to stimulate research in the social history of psychology: conclusions were already drawn. Finally, on the theoretical level the anti-capitalist critique in most cases wasn't able to counter the 'heroic' historiography of psychology - it merely contradicted it.

Compared to the marxist strand, Foucault and his followers were more sophisticated. They tried to establish in detail the workings of psychological techniques, ranging from mental testing to psychotherapy. They at least tried to engage in real historical research, thereby shifting the debate from political to theoretical and historical issues.

Still, they tacitly assumed that the cultural effect of the 'psy'-disciplines (including psychiatry and psychoanalysis) was a one-way street. Psy-workers actively enforced their views and techniques upon the defenseless public, thereby changing 'the subject' from a sociological into a psychological being. Needless to say that there is more to it: the psychologization of culture is a dynamic two-way process. Throughout the 20th century, lay people have always shown interest in psychological ideas and issues, and moreover, actively sought help from psychologists and psychotherapists, in fields ranging from child rearing to vocational guidance. Of course, their interest in psychology depended on the information that was available to them, and vice versa it was of course in the interest of professional psychologists to provide them with that information. This explains the wide variety of psychological books and articles aimed at informing and educating the lay public. (I gave an example of this process last year in the Durham conference in my paper on family therapy.)

So yes, psychologists have actively disseminated their views and techniques, but these fell upon a fertile ground. In my opinion, the perspective of the dialectical process involved here not only is more adequate than the conceptions mentioned above, it is also more stimulating for historical research.

However, in the remaining part of my presentation I will not, like my colleagues did this morning, present the results of a research project, but limit myself to adressing a couple of theoretical and conceptual issues that are connected with the use of the term 'psychologization'.

First, and most important on the conceptual level, what exactly is, in my opinion, the relation between psychologization and psychology? This, of course, depends on how 'psychology' is conceptualized, and we are all well aware of the intricacies of that endeavour. It certainly is tempting (and maybe obligatory for colleagues working in psychology departments) to define
psychology as it cares to define itself, as 'the science of human behavior' or 'the science of mental life'. Especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, using the word 'science' offers advantages, since it implies a comfortable and profitable proximity to the natural sciences, the 'big brothers' that helped empirical psychology to come into existence. It also gives status to the work of psychological practitioners in society, suggesting that what they do is merely an 'application' of findings from laboratory research. As historians of psychology we all know this is a misrepresentation, but for psychologists - both researchers and practitioners - it serves a useful purpose. Not only does it support the alleged unity of psychology, it makes practitioners scientifically respectable and researchers socially respectable.

Accepting this view of psychology entails a limitation of what 'psychologization' can mean. It is 'the historical emergence and dissemination of psychological practices' (the second definition as presented by Jeroen Jansz). In addition, Jansz' third definition ('the growing impact of psychology on society and the public') might also be appropriate, but that is debatable, because the psychological ideas that became popular usually are met with disapproval by academic psychologists.

When starting from a social or cultural rather than a psychological point of view, the possible meaning of psychologization changes profoundly. We would be asking which kind of changes in cultural history could be linked to psychological ideas and practices. We would be interested in finding out how new kinds of subjectivity came about (the first and fourth definition given by Jansz). And finally, we would not limit ourselves the self-conception of academic psychology but instead focus on 'everyday psychology' as it can be found among the public.

So, while concurring with Jansz' fourth definition, I am more radical in dismissing the self-conception of psychology as a starting point for historical analysis. Instead I would suggest to concentrate on the development of 'everyday psychology' - the way people view themselves and others, and how this view in the historical process gets informed by popularized ideas from the field of academic and professional psychology. The dismissal of the self-concept of academic psychology also opens up the possibility of including psychoanalysis, which has been a major influence in the psychologization of modern societies and their inhabitants, but has been treated stepmotherly or even with hostility by academic psychology.

The main issue here is not whether a theory or idea is 'true' according to scientific (positivistic or other) standards. This is an issue academic psychology itself must deal with. The focus here is on theories that 'work', in the sense that people believe that human beings indeed have a psyche, that unconscious motives exist, that people can 'grow', that stimuli elicit a response, that 'talking about your feelings' is beneficial to marriage and child rearing and so on. In addition, it is important that people have come to believe that mental illness, educational problems, unhappiness in marriage or even delinquent behaviour are phenomena that can be understood by psychological analyses and be treated with psychological techniques. Finally, and probably most decisive, is that the public has learned that not just professionals but also people without a professional psychological training can use psychological theories to make sense of themselves and their fellow human beings. In the clinical and educational field lay men are even encouraged to do so: early recognition of symptoms of mental derangement might prevent a more serious mental disorder.

I believe that precisely at this point psychologization differs from most other -zations (such as medicalization, which is probably best known, or psychiatrization, which is probably hardest to pronounce). In the medical field, esoteric knowledge is cherished (although of course people are supposed to take good care of their bodies and pay attention to signals of potential ailments). The same goes for law: people are supposed to 'know the law', but when things get complicated you are expected to consult a lawyer. But in the case of emotional or mental problems people are allowed to go a long way before they see a professional.

My explanation for this would be that within the domain of psychological help, it is the client him- or herself that has to provide the information about what is wrong. In other words, therapy or any other form of counselling is partly based on the self-knowledge of the client. The importance of self-knowledge, still an elitist affair in previous centuries, during the twentieth century slowly has trickled down into the common sense.

It is obvious that in my interpretation of psychologization a large part of psychology is left out. Experimental psychology does not focus on psychological subjects (although that is what participants in laboratory experiments are usually called - psychological objects would be a more appropriate term), but on general laws of human behaviour or general cognitive processes.

On the whole there appears to be a misfit between psychology as a science and psychologization as a cultural process.

This misconnection reflects a permanent (and probably insoluble) contradistinction within
psychology itself. On the one hand, there is the paradigm that is influenced by the natural sciences and the nomological tradition. This brand of psychology focuses on the human ‘hardware’ (perception, cognition, motor skills, etc.) and has no use for explorations of the vicissitudes of human subjectivity. The application of its research findings requires skilled technicians. On the other hand, there is the tradition of psychology as a ‘helping profession’ (not necessarily limited to the clinical field) which is inspired by psychoanalysis and ultimately the medical profession, focussing on the human ‘software’ – the way people experience and (mis)represent their world. Interestingly enough, this division within psychology has been recognized explicitly by experimental psychologists when they started to call their field ‘psychonomics’ in the mid-sixties. ‘Psychonomists occupy themselves with psychological problems, psychologists deal with human problems’, as a colleague of mine once put it.

From the foregoing it is understandable why the public is far more fascinated by psychological theories that deal with their inner life than by psychonomics - they might learn something, not just about laws of human behaviour, but about the core of their being, their selves, their subjectivity. But does this also imply that they embrace the Western image of ‘the autonomous, rational and responsible citizen’, as is suggested earlier? No, they don't. It is what people would want to be, but they are usually well aware of the obstacles on the way. From psychoanalysis they have learned that the psyche is a complicated machinery full of hidden traumatic experiences. Even in the so-called ‘humanistic’ psychology, growth and peak experiences are seen as goals to reach, not as self-evident.

The conception of the subject in everyday psychology is double-edged, reflecting the two possible meanings of the word subject. On the one hand it refers to the world of inner feelings that are believed to be unique to the individual, also implying that people are self-reflexive, able to make decisions and act accordingly. (People have to believe that they have freedom of choice at least some of the time, otherwise they wouldn't be able to act at all.) On the other hand, in a more literal sense, people are subjected or determined by a variety of influences: economic, social, cultural and psychological. And as far as the latter are concerned, they feel they can benefit from psychological knowledge to get a grip on at least their inner life, as if it were the only level they could gain some freedom.

In conclusion, would it then not be preferable to use the term ‘subjectification’ instead of ‘psychologization’ for the cultural process in which people are ‘construed’ as subjects, in both senses of the word? Apart from the disadvantages of introducing yet another new concept in an already overloaded conceptual field, in my opinion it would imply that we, as historians of the social sciences, would succumb (or: subject ourselves) to the self-definition of academic psychology, instead of investigating the - admittedly - less scientific and certainly more elusive self-image and practices of everyday psychology. The choice is yours! (Or ours...)

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