



Neoliberal capitalism is the dominant cultural system in the world today. As such, it is an essential topic for cultural psychology. The cultural psychology of neoliberalism is essential for understanding people's psychology in the modern era. Neoliberal psychology is also a vital window into the culture, economics, and politics of neoliberal capitalism, for those interested in understanding them. Neoliberal psychology adds insights into neoliberalism by revealing its psychological effects.

I utilize cultural psychology to provide a distinctive insight into neoliberal culture and modern (neoliberal) psychology. I specifically extend Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology to accomplish this task.

In addition, the cultural psychological exploration of neoliberal psychology and culture enriches the academic

discipline of cultural psychology. It does so by extending cultural psychology into these politically and economically fraught domains. Neoliberal psychology extends cultural psychology to study neoliberalism (neoliberal economics, politics, religion, education, government, news, entertainment, advertising), class society, and pertinent issues such as ideology, oppression, and false consciousness. This expanded curriculum of cultural psychology increases its political and economic sophistication. It additionally corrects tendencies within cultural psychology that minimize these issues in favor of personal and interpersonal issues.

This book is thus a contribution to modern culture, contemporary psychology, and Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology.

This book makes an additional contribution -- to social and psychological improvement. Its conclusions about neoliberal culture and neoliberal psychology identify serious problems in both; these are utilized to indicate directions for improvement. This interdependent improvement of social and psychological activity is a distinctive contribution that cultural psychology makes from its theoretical perspective that synthesizes culture and psychology.

Unfortunately, the cultural psychology of neoliberal culture has not been explored by cultural psychologists. This book fills this pressing gap. It is the only book that

presents the discipline of cultural psychology, and Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology, to address neoliberal culture and neoliberal psychology in a comprehensive fashion. It is the only book to provide a thorough-going cultural context to neoliberal psychology. It includes the history and cultural organization and practices of neoliberalism as they bear on psychology. This reveals modern psychology in new, rich forms that escape less cultural discussions of psychology. It is the only book to elucidate the distinctive insights from cultural psychology regarding social and psychological enrichment in the neoliberal context.

I develop a theoretically sophisticated, cultural-psychological analysis of the psychology of neoliberalism. I do not simply correlate certain psychological reactions with neoliberalism. I do not simply describe how people regard themselves as individual entrepreneurs who aim to maximize their own success. I deepen these descriptions by explaining how psychological phenomena take on capitalist form with capitalist features and content. In other words, I demonstrate how psychological phenomena exist as cultural capital. I utilize this construct from Bourdieu as an explanatory construct and operating mechanism of psychology. This is deep cultural psychology, in that it shows how psychology is organized by cultural factors, takes on their form, and reproduces them. In capitalism,

this cultural psychology takes the form of cultural capital, or neoliberal psychology. Emotions, perception, self-concept, gender, sexuality are forms of cultural capital, they have capitalist form. Emotional capital is capitalist emotions, self-as-capital is capitalist self. Neoliberal capital penetrates to the core of psychological phenomena and restructures them.

## Neoliberal Psychology

Carl Ratner

### Dedication

To Lumei. Lemon tree very pretty and the lemon flower is sweet

Margaret Thatcher:

Economics are the method [for neoliberalism], but the object is to change the soul.

Henry David Thoreau:

There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.

Foucault:

It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the

political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.

This critique and this fight seem essential to me for different reasons: first, because political power goes much deeper than one suspects; there are centers and invisible, little-known points of support; its true resistance, its true solidity is perhaps where one doesn't expect it. Probably it's insufficient to say that behind the governments, behind the apparatus of the state, there is the dominant class; one must locate the point of activity, the places and forms in which its domination is exercised. And because this domination is not simply the expression in political terms of economic exploitation, it is its instrument and, to a large extent, the condition which makes it possible; the suppression of the one is achieved through the exhaustive discernment of the other. Well, if one fails to recognize these points of support of class power, one risks allowing them to continue to exist; and to see this class power reconstitute itself even after an apparent revolutionary process.

It is only too clear that we are living under a regime of a dictatorship of class, of a power of class which imposes itself by violence, even when the instruments of this violence are institutional and constitutional (Chomsky-Foucault, 2006, pp. 41, 39).

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## Table of Contents

### Preface

The Reasons, Purposes, and Outcomes of  
This Book

Neoliberal psychology: the cultural  
psychology of our era

Psychological theory for neoliberal psychology

### I. Introduction. Definition and Snapshots of Neoliberal Society and Psychology

A few facts that define global neoliberalism  
Ideological obfuscation: blaming the victim

Neoliberal socio-economic-political activities

The neoliberal medical encounter

Neoliberal government and its social effects

Neoliberal environmental management and its social  
effects

Neoliberal scientific research

Social media

Neoliberal Weltanschauung, Geist, Mentalité, Épistème,  
Ethos, Collective Representations

Neoliberalism and neoliberal psychology

## Part I. A Psychological Theory for Comprehending Neoliberal Capitalism and Neoliberal Psychology

### 2. Macro Cultural Psychology

Linguistic codes  
Macro cultural Psychology and  
Vygotsky's cultural historical  
Psychology  
Psychology and the conical cultural system  
Informal behavior  
Macro cultural psychology and  
neoliberalism

## Part II. Neoliberal Capitalism: The Source of Neoliberal Psychology

### 3. The Neoliberal Political Economy

Origins of the neoliberal movement  
American neoliberalism  
Neoliberal cornerstones and strategies  
Intensifying and extending the capitalist form of  
macro cultural factors.  
Commodifying Sports in China  
The Neoliberal, Capitalist Business Form/Model  
Neoliberal governments  
Neoliberal labor  
Neoliberalism with Chinese  
Characteristics  
Profit from Destabilizing Work: Precarity

## Conclusions about the Neoliberal Political Economy Neoliberal Social Benefits

### 4. Neoliberal Education: Enforcer of The Neoliberal Class Structure

The Neoliberal Capitalist Control of Education

Fashions the Neoliberal Capitalist Form and

Objectives of Education

The Capitalist Form of Education

The Class Basis, and Class Function, of Neoliberal,

Educational System

Lower Class Education

### 5. Ideology: Culture Obscuring Itself To Its People

Sources of ideology

Intentional ideology

Entrepreneurial ideology

Happiness as entrepreneurial

Ideology

Intrinsic ideology

Psychiatry as

neoliberal ideology

Chinese, neoliberal,



Psychological ideology  
The neoliberal cultural system and neoliberal  
psychology

Part III: Neoliberal Psychology: The Subjectivity  
of Neoliberal Capitalism

6. Neoliberal Psychology

Psychology of oppression  
Psychology as cultural capital

Neoliberal ideology as a psychological tool

Other psychological reactions generated by  
Entrepreneurial-self ideology

Neoliberal class structure as a psychological  
tool

The social class demography of  
psychological phenomena

Empirical evidence about the class structure of  
sociolinguistic codes

Cultural capital as a psychological tool that generates  
neoliberal form to psychology

Neoliberal Developmental Psychology

Neoliberalism is a sexually  
transmitted disease: Hook-up Sex

Neoliberal psychology and macro cultural psychology  
Psychological and cultural assessment

Part IV: Macro Cultural Psychological Theory and  
Psychological and Cultural Emancipation

7. Macro Cultural Psychological Science  
Generates Insights for Cultural Emancipation and  
Psychological Emancipation

The scientific value of macro cultural psychological  
theory for framing and organizing the study of  
neoliberal psychology

The political value of macro cultural psychological  
theory: Elucidating emancipatory possibilities  
from neoliberal psychology and society

Gender As An Explanatory and Emancipatory  
Psychological Construct

References

## Preface

### The Reasons, Purposes, and Outcomes of This Book

This book is about the psychology of people living in neoliberal capitalist society. Their psychology is neoliberal psychology. It is infused with neoliberal form and content. These characteristics of neoliberal psychology derive from the characteristics of neoliberal society and require a deep understanding of the latter. Neoliberal psychology is thus a vital insight into neoliberal society. Neoliberal psychology brings society into psychology, and psychology into society. It breaks down the false, artificial division between society and psychology that is practiced in academia and in everyday life.

This book has been motivated by four concerns: 1) To scientifically understand the cultural psychology of people in the neoliberal era, 2) To develop the academic discipline of cultural psychology to become adequate to comprehending neoliberal psychology, 3) To utilize neoliberal psychology to deepen our understanding of neoliberal society (which is dominant around the world), and 4) To utilize our understanding of neoliberal psychology and neoliberal society to enrich/improve our current psychology and social system. We need a coherent understanding of the present and its dialectical potential for a qualitatively improved future. The current lack of this understanding is responsible for the triple errors of current social trends: a) ignoring or accepting the true causes of oppression, and electing economic and political oppressors as social leaders, b) attacking innocent scapegoats such as immigrants, gender, religious groups, and race, c) lacking a vision of a viable,

comprehensive alternative to neoliberalism. All of these errors intensify the oppression and crises that afflict the populace.

The distinctive contribution of cultural psychology to social emancipation lies in the scientific conceptualization of psychological phenomena as cultural phenomena that are elements of cultural factors and processes. It follows that enriching, fulfilling, and emancipating psychology requires enriching, fulfilling, and emancipating its cultural basis and character. No other psychological approach includes emancipating the social system within its purview because no other approach conceptualizes psychology as elements of the system.

The political, critical, transformative, emancipatory thrust of cultural psychology is particularly necessary in this era of cascading geo-political, environmental, economic, and moral disasters. This book elucidates the contribution that cultural psychology can make to salvaging and advancing human civilization.

### Neoliberal Psychology: The Cultural Psychology of Our Era

Neoliberal psychology is not simply certain natural reactions to neoliberal society. It is not simply that neoliberal society galvanizes our anxiety or confusion or hyperactivity or suspiciousness or defensiveness or depression or confidence, or creativity. These abstract, psychobiological reactions to neoliberalism do not capture the neoliberal form and content of our psychology. They would actually reduce neoliberal psychology to a quantitative point on a universal scale. They would reduce culture to a simple, quantitative regulator of universal, specific psychological processes. (This is the methodology of most cross-cultural psychologists who compare diverse cultures on their degree of “religiosity,” or “neuroticism.”)

Neoliberal psychology, like all psychology, is a concrete form and content of psychological processes – e.g., emotions, perception,

cognition, motivation, memory, psychological disturbance. Neoliberal psychology is not how we respond to neoliberalism on the basis of our individual (biological or personal) response mechanisms (which are outside neoliberalism). Neoliberal psychology is how neoliberalism forms our psychological responses to things, events, and people. we do not simply respond to neoliberalism, we are neoliberal responders.

The concrete, neoliberal form and content of psychology are our self, our emotion of love, our sexuality, our attention and perception, our memory, our child development, our femininity, our masculinity, our parenting, our eating, our dressing, our thinking/reasoning, our needs, and our communicating.

Our psychology is not simply situated within a neoliberal context; our psychology is infused with the features of that context. (Vygotsky, 1994b, p. 348, said "The environment is a factor in the realm of personality development, and its role is to act as the source of this development...and not its context.") The neoliberal context is within us as well as outside. We do not simply live in neoliberal capitalism; we live neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism is our life and we are the life of neoliberal capitalism; we are neoliberal subjects, we are neoliberal agents, we have neoliberal psychology which is the subjectivity of neoliberal capitalism.

Neoliberal psychology is as much our character as being French or Italian is. Italians do not simply live in Italy, they are Italian, their psyches and bodies are Italian in the sense that they have Italian form and content; they act and think and dress and eat "Italian." Neoliberal psychology is our cultural psychology, just as Italian is cultural psychology. We are neoliberal subjects just as we are Italian or French. Our psychology has neoliberal form and content. Just as we emphasize the unique, concrete, incomparable, untranslatable qualities of Ifaluk emotions (e.g., "fago"), Japanese Amae, Yoruba mental illness, Wahhabi Islamic femininity, Victorian

sexuality, and the Kibbutzum self-concept, so we must emphasize the concrete, incomparable, untranslatable, form and content of the neoliberal self, neoliberal emotions, neoliberal perceptions, neoliberal femininity, neoliberal childhood, neoliberal motives, neoliberal needs, and neoliberal sexuality.

Our neoliberal indigenous psychology merges with and modulates our Frenchness, our Italianness, our Chineseness. We are neoliberal Frenchmen, or French neoliberals; we are Chinese with neoliberal characteristics; just as Germans are feudal Germans or bourgeois Germans, depending upon the political economic system they live in. Their feudal and bourgeois characters are as pronounced as their “German” character is – and modulate their Germanity. The same holds for the neoliberal features of culture and psychology – they are as pronounced as their national features are – if not more so. Contemporary Germans are neoliberal Germans just as their forebearers were medieval Germans.

Neoliberal psychology is a new cultural form, along the lines of Eric Fromm’s cultural personality types such as the receptive, exploitative, hoarding, marketing, and productive personality. In cultural terms of customs and rituals, capitalization is the central ritual of neoliberal capitalism.

It is apparent that trans-national neoliberalism is becoming a more powerful cultural force than national cultural histories are. Liu (2008, p. 193) found evidence of this in her detailed ethnography of Chinese youth: “In planning their lives and attempting to achieve their life goals, the young people have adopted an individualized approach, displaying a form of the autonomous, self-authoring and individualistic neoliberal subject, with little reference to the socialist collectivist values with which the Party has been attempting to indoctrinate Chinese citizens.” (I would argue that the neoliberal self of a 20-year old Chinese girl in Shanghai is more similar to an

international cohort's self in neoliberal Berlin than to a cohort from her national Chinese culture such as the Sui Dynasty.) Of course, national cultural histories remain important factors in society and psychology. They modulate or mediate neoliberalism in each particular culture. Neoliberalism is not a singular variable (Ratner, 1997a).

The rising dominance of neoliberalism in society and psychology is not surprising given the neoliberal integration of countries today. Liu (2008, p. 210) explains this neoliberal cultural conditioning of psychology in China: "The fierce competition based on the 'jungle law,' lack of social security, including old-age care of the parents -- which constitutes emerging burdens especially for the only-child -- credentialism, widespread corruption and consumerism, all seem to teach people that it is oneself and one's family that it is the most reliable welfare agency for individual well-being, which is increasingly being defined according to the western middle-class lifestyle."

Bhatia and Priya (2018, p. 662) report the same occurrence in India: "New forms of Indianness are also being shaped by media, transnational circuits, travel, and outsourcing. The presence of American cultural symbols and practices, the establishment of the IT industry and call centers, and the insertion of cross-cultural psychology, psychotherapy, testing, and personality evaluation through psychological science and new-age psychology is not only impacting the work life of young Indian workers, but it is also reconstituting the very meaning of "Indianness."

International neoliberal capitalist organizations such as the World Trade Organization, Devos, G20, Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation, agree on common neoliberal economic agendas for all their members. National characteristics are marginalized. A shopping mall in China or Saudi Arabia or Los Angeles is indistinguishable. Educational standards are also

becoming globalized and interchangeable as students shift from one country to another during their studies. In addition, professional Psychology, in academia and in therapeutic interventions, is becoming globalized and neoliberalized. For example, Chinese academic Psychology is identical to American, neoliberal, positivistic psychology.<sup>i</sup> Since professional Psychology frames many psychological constructs of everyday life, it contributes to the internationalizing of neoliberal psychology in the populace. For instance,

Urban Indian workers are expected to largely follow the ideology of Western corporate culture through individual transformation, embracing a self-Orientalizing framework, acquiring new behaviors of increased emotional intelligence, assertiveness, flexibility, productivity, and self-regulation. The corporations deploy a series of personality tests to recruit, evaluate, and to assess the personality types and traits of the employees. Soft-skills psychological workshops are conducted to create assertive, confident, happy, and self-reliant workers. For instance, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Transactional Analysis inventories are two of the most commonly used instruments for training purposes in Indian corporations” (Bhatia & Priya, p. 654).

Just as we can only understand Italian psychology by understanding Italian culture, so we must understand neoliberal culture, or society, in order to understand neoliberal psychology. Cultural studies must include neoliberal culture.



Because neoliberal psychology reflects and embodies neoliberal cultural factors, it can be an important window into expanding our understanding of neoliberalism. Neoliberal psychology gives life to official, structural, policies; it informs us of the manner in which they are lived by people and the effects they have on real life. Neoliberal psychology testifies to the level of development of neoliberalism in political and economic domains. The more pervasive that neoliberal love, sexuality, self-concept, childhood, parenthood, needs, and interpersonal relations are, the more dominant neoliberal political economy is, because psychology reflects such macro cultural factors.

Psychological insights into society are valuable for designing strategies to improve society. These insights and strategies may contradict official propaganda and objectives (Ratner, 2017b).

### Psychological Theory for Neoliberal Psychology

The fact that neoliberal psychology does not exist for psychologists is a major failure of the discipline. It testifies to underlying inadequacies in the concerns, theories, and methodologies of psychologists. It is remarkable that virtually all psychologists ignore the dominant character of human psychology in the world today. This failure plagues mainstream academic psychologists (cognitive psychologists, developmental psychologists, physiological psychologists, social psychologists, health psychologists, educational psychologists), psychiatrists, psycho-therapists, cross-cultural psychologists, and most cultural psychologists. Neoliberal psychology is simply not one of their constructs or topics.

A psychological theory and methodology for neoliberal psychology must be developed. It must incorporate the scope of neoliberal psychology – including its cultural basis, socializing mechanisms (how do emotions, perceptions, mental illness take

on cultural form and content?), operating mechanisms, relation to neoliberal society – and it must include mechanisms for social and psychological improvement. These points must be built into the psychological theory and methodology so that they can be elucidated by the theory and methodology. Tools are constructed for handling specific kinds of things with particular properties.

A Psychology for neoliberal psychology must be constructed for apprehending the psychology of neoliberalism. Neoliberal psychology refers to both of these. It refers to the everyday psychology of people and to the academic Psychology that apprehends it (which I designate with a capital P).

The only suitable theory for researching neoliberal psychology must be a cultural-psychological theory that emanates from, and draws upon, social science research into the relationship between culture and psychology. This research has occurred in psychological anthropology, medical anthropology, sociology of emotions, history of emotions, cultural studies, cultural hermeneutics, cultural linguistics, and sociology of gender and social class. Examples of this work include research on Ifaluk emotions, or language and perception among native American Indians. The theories and methodologies of this kind of research can be expanded to study neoliberal psychology.

The cultural psychological theory that is the most sophisticated, coherent, and suitable for neoliberal psychology is known as cultural-historical psychology. It was developed by Vygotsky and his colleagues in the wake of the Russian Revolution. Vygotsky's followers have promoted his general concepts in fields such as child psychology, linguistics, and educational psychology. However, they (with few exceptions) have neglected (and denied, distorted, and trivialized) the “macro” aspects of Vygotsky's theory (Ratner, 2018, a, b, c;

2015, 2016a; 2019, chapter 5; Ratner & Nunes, 2017b). This leaves them incapable of applying the theory to social issues such as neoliberalism. I have developed Vygotsky's macro ideas under the name "macro cultural psychology" (see Ratner, 2018a,b,c; 2017a,b; 2016a; 2015; 2014c; 2013; 2012a,b). This is the theory I shall utilize to analyze neoliberal psychology.

The general theory of cultural-historical psychology/macro cultural psychology informs us about how culture is organized and how this organization structures our psychology.

For example, the general theory of cultural-historical psychology/macro cultural psychology postulates (from theoretical and empirical research) that psychological phenomena are most powerfully organized/influenced by the political economy of a cultural system. Vygotsky (1997b, pp. 55, 56, 348, 211-212) explained:

Since we know that each person's individual experience is conditioned by the role he plays in his environment, and that it is the class membership which defines this role, it is clear that class membership defines man's psychology and man's behavior. Social stimuli that have been established in the course of historical development...are permeated through and through with the class structure of society that generated them and serve as the class organization of production. They are responsible for all of human behavior, and in this sense we are justified in speaking of man's class behavior.

Vygotsky is saying that the class structure -- which reflects political-economic power, wealth, ownership, wage labor, and principles of production -- conditions the social roles of society, individual experience (in those roles), and individual psychology (in social experience). This is a cultural theory contained within his psychological theory (or vice versa). The validity of the psychological theory depends upon the validity of the culture theory. If the culture theory directs us to marginal, superficial, or fallacious cultural features, this will impede our ability to comprehend the concrete form and content of psychological phenomena.

Applying this to neoliberal psychology means that we must comprehend neoliberalism's political economy and trace its influence into the class structure, social roles, individual experience, and individual psychology. That will provide us with the most important explanatory constructs, descriptive constructs, and predictive constructs of neoliberal psychology's form and content. My presentation of neoliberal society will therefore emphasize its political economy for understanding other cultural factors and also psychology.

The theory also provides important constructs for explaining the processes by which psychology takes on cultural form and content.

While neoliberal society contains the keys to comprehending neoliberal psychology, it does not hand them to us on a platter. We need a theory to extract them.

This book is a dialectical dance between neoliberal psychology and macro cultural psychological theory, with each illuminating the other, and also adapting to the other. Neoliberal psychology is opened by macro cultural theory to reveal unnoticed features which are conceptually analyzed and organized in new ways; and the theory is opened by neoliberal psychology that stimulates new theoretical concepts, distinctions, and organization. Refining the theory is as

important as comprehending neoliberal psychology, because the latter requires the former.

Because macro cultural psychological theory is the organizing framework that selects and organizes the elements of neoliberal psychology in relation to neoliberal society, it would normally be positioned as the introduction to a book such as this. That would explain what issues and relationships we are looking for, why they are important, and how they bear on related cultural and psychological issues. However, there are two reasons this is not the best strategy for introducing this book. One is the nature of the theory, and the other is the nature of the subject matter, neoliberal psychology. The theory is a grand, general, scientific theory of cultural psychology; it will appear abstract and distracting to the reader who is looking to comprehend concrete neoliberal psychology. This is an acute problem for this subject matter because neoliberal psychology is a new subject that is undefined. The reader will feel doubly lost reading a grand, general, abstract psychological theory that is supposed to eventually explain an undefined topic.

To avoid these two problems, I will introduce this book with some concise snapshots about neoliberal society and neoliberal psychology. The reader can interpolate these specific referents while reading the theory of macro cultural psychology in chapter one. Neoliberal society shall be described in chapters 2, 3, and 4, which address neoliberal political economy, neoliberal education, and neoliberal ideology. These are central structures that organize neoliberal psychological phenomena. Neoliberal psychological phenomena will be selectively described in chapter five. The final chapter, six, will review the relationship between cultural-historical/macro cultural psychological theory and neoliberal psychology. It will conclude by explaining how the scientific advances of macro cultural

psychological theory play a progressive political role in enriching psychology and society. I explain how the macro cultural psychological science of neoliberal psychology exposes deep-seated, destructive features of neoliberal society, and these call for society's reorganization in a cooperative, democratic form. This advanced form of society generates psychological phenomena which embody this fulfilling form. Cultural science leads to progressive cultural politics which are necessary for advancing society and psychology. This is the dialectical spiral of science and politics. It makes politics scientific, and science political.

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## Notes

i Actually, Chinese Psychology is more conservative and neoliberal because it lacks the progressive, countervailing scholarship of theoretical psychology, sociocultural psychology, macro cultural psychology, and critical psychology.