A Critical Disquisition on the Ideology of Anxiety

Jeppe Pasgaard
University of Southern Denmark

Abstract

The essay explores how transdisciplinary and psychoanalytic perspectives can contribute to critical psychological studies of anxiety, namely how psychological concepts take part in the shaping and transformation of subjects in practice. Building on the subject science of German-Nordic Critical Psychology, the approach of this paper is centered around the ambiguity of anxiety in its subjective and objective form. In German-Nordic Critical Psychology, anxiety is an integral aspect of human agency in and through how subjects relate to their possibilities to act in tandem with the possible effects of transacting those possibilities concretely. How the subject relates to its possibilities has societal preconditions and implications and is mediated by cultural objects and their meanings in structures of ideology. With the advent and proliferation of the psy-discourse, anxiety itself has become one such cultural object and a pivotal form of everyday ideology. In the paper, I will begin from a personal encounter with the therapeutic discourse followed by an introduction to German-Nordic Critical Psychology and its later post-psychological developments. By analyzing the concept of anxiety throughout representative Danish therapeutic research and literature, I will outline the promises of an existentialist critique of ideology: how critique only properly reflects subjectivity to the extent that it emancipates the subject from its spontaneous ideological form.

Keywords: Anxiety, ideology critique, agency, post-psychology

Point of departure

In the spring of 2021, I was finishing my master's degree on the concept of anxiety. A widely popular Danish psychiatrist, Peter Lund Madsen, published a book targeting a lay audience on the very same concept. In his book, *When Children and Adolescents get Anxiety,* he generally elaborates on the prevalence of anxiety amongst the population, its innate character of being a natural survival mechanism, and the experiences and delicate challenges of keeping it under control should it present itself (2021, author's translation). His introduction begins with a certain problematization of anxiety, setting out by extensively describing its immediate experience and symptoms, but, in a calming manner,

he explains that "anxiety can be agonizing but is not itself dangerous and can be controlled or overcome in most cases" (Madsen, 2021, p. 5, author's translation). However, as a reader, I felt like I had missed his presentation of what anxiety *is*, as if I had arrived late to a lecture that was amid introducing ways of how to solve and think about a problem that had never been properly determined. A certain form of consensus was assumed that made it seemingly unnecessary for Madsen to reflect or present anxiety as a problem, and instead appropriate a certain common-sense on anxiety that we, his readers, already recognize and thus leave unquestioned and unchallenged. More specifically, I could only try and revert to how anxiety is established as a problem based on the "obvious" need for individuals to overcome and control their anxiety - as if they produced it themselves. He appeals to us that we immediately recognize this need and desire, and that we agree on the nature of anxiety in tandem with its reflexive bracketing. It is in this conjoined recognition of "nature" that common-sense is both the result and is put into work, and, thus, there is even reflexivity to the act of establishing immediacy; that is when tending to the forms of recognition necessary for the bracketing of reflection that characterize common-sense.

For the purpose of this paper, I will not trace concepts of anxiety back through the specific disciplines and sciences they come from, e.g., psychiatry, medicine, biology. Instead, the subject of my analysis is the ways in which various disciplines appeal to and have become a part of modern culture in distinct ways and in precarious (dis-) connection with a wider collective, historical, political common-sense. In short, it is the everyday ideology of anxiety that constitute my center of attention, albeit by acknowledging the relevant boundaries of how anxiety becomes a problem, an object, and how psychology, as Morten Nissen phrases it, "has drenched popular culture and everyday life" (2023, p. 21). Psychology does not simply provide these cultures and everyday forms of life with esoteric scientific-expertise, but this knowledge - and psychology as such - has itself become an integral part of those very cultural and ideological forms of living.

The psy-disciplines (psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy) may be, to some extent at least, distinct disciplines and practices, but in their culturized modality they all revolve around everyday life as a measurement of their relevance – a relevance that, not coincidentally, also tie them together. For instance, the "brain metaphor" has seen use across almost all of the psy-disciplines, primarily because this reference to a pseudo-biological reductionism, e.g., ascribing "agency" to the brain ("when you panic, it is really something neurological going on inside your brain, preparing you to fight or flight"). This provisionary interpretation lends anxiety a somewhat scientific stabilizing effect – a form of "objectivity". In a broader sense, psychologies of anxiety can borrow the social recognition from another (more "objective") conceptual framework, but often on contingent and obscure conditions. Not only does this make a certain interpretative practice *work* for the everyday ideology of 'psy,' but this internal stabilization situates the interpretative legitimacy only through the reflexive links that are formed between everyday practices and the disciplines they refer to, call upon, and depend upon to provide social recognition. It is thus relevant to question how these links are established and with which disciplines, but even more crucially, on the side of everyday ideology we are left with a slim chance of distinguishing one form of 'psy' from another. Subjects are often left with a precarious and oddly assembled network of vague concepts and references that form a unified and everyday applicable discourse way beyond their scientificity. And yet, we face a precarious reciprocity between scientific-expertise and everyday life, but this

connection is seldom reflected from everyday practices, i.e., the everyday ideology of psychology. Approaches to this issue of 'psy' has given its discourse many names, e.g., discourse of therapy, pop psychology, mainstream psychology, psychology of everyday life. As I will try and scrutinize the culturalized form of the psy-disciplines, I will be using these terms synonymously; and although each of them might hold different connotations, they all pivot around the popularization of 'psy' and its broader social and societal implications. It could be relevant to contemplate whether the distinction of different kinds of 'psy' would be worthwhile to map out, but the object of the present analysis is precisely to interrogate the ideology of 'psy' in its everyday amalgamated form. Here, disciplinary boundaries are resituated – perhaps even dispersed – and attention to its 'mapping' would benefit from empirical studies, which is beyond the scope of my approach.

For the purpose of this paper, I will unfold different theoretical aspects of the concept of anxiety within cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) as this approach represents the predominating way to think about anxiety. It is, however, not without reproach that I draw attention to the appeal of pop psychology and how this discourse has become a generalized form of emotional (self-)interpretation. As a point of departure and core aspect of this paper, I wish to elaborate on the intricate relationship between the provisions of scientific-expertise knowledge and the practices and existential situations in which this knowledge might be employed and find personal resonance. Sociologist Nicolas Rose describes this contingent relationship as "the 'social' role of psychology, the actual social existence and operation of its truths, procedures, and personnel and their linkages to the academic field of the discipline" – or what I would describe as *the allegiance between psychology and its subjects* (1996, p. 82). By introducing exemplary representations of theories on anxiety within CBT, I will demonstrate how the emotional functioning of anxiety is interpreted as a disturbance and obstacle in everyday life. Emotions consequently become an object for scientific-expertise scrutiny only in and through how they appear during difficulties of adaptation. Furthermore, as we shall see, CBT establishes precarious connections between cognition (disorientation), emotion (anxiety), and behavior (dysfunction). As Osterkamp already formulated in the late 1970's with the beginning of the German-Nordic Critical Psychology, the bourgeois ideology of emotion theories centers around an immediate interest in "the individual's adaptation to specific pre-given environmental conditions and the psychological control over this adaptation" (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1979, p. 254, author's translation). I will be guided by this recognition, but at the same time drawing on its later developments in dialogue with Zizekian psychoanalysis and existentialist insights of Kierkegaard as crucial philosophies on the topic of subjectivity and anxiety.

Anxiety in front of and behind the subject

Wolfgang Fritz-Haug, a key philosopher of German-Nordic Critical Psychology, said it clearest: "There is no truly rational approach that does not begin in the world of everyday experience and remains mediated by it. The problem is clear, but the solution is problematic. The problem is: to gather knowledge about the forms in which everything is initially thought of spontaneously" (1979, p. 162, author's translation). This conception of spontaneous thoughtforms shares some interesting similarities with Slavoj Zizek's notion of ideology, which he formulates as the spontaneous way of perceiving reality, i.e., without any constructs or metaphysics (1994). For Zizek, the proper formative dimension

of ideology is how it leads its subjects to believe that its perceptive reality is the "right" one. Similarly to Fritz-Haug's emphasis that there are no "rational approaches" outside everyday experience, with Zizek, there is no external non-ideological reality or "objectivity" freed from social interests and affairs. Often, the motive for "objectivity" itself demonstrates this perfectly, as a particular interest of particular social practices. As we shall see, this is relevant for the psy-discourse as a distinct form of ideology who's scientific "beginning" allegedly is separated from everyday life, and yet appears to hold a wealth of promises and affordances due to its recognition and social status as scientific-expertise. For the psy-discourse to appeal to everyday ideology it must abide and instigate a certain framing that allows for a representation freed from the quotidian "going-about" – problems, interests, affections, despair, etc. – of our everyday experiences. Only in this way can its ideological functioning as the "right" interpretation remain intact, i.e., as something beyond mere interpretation. The appeal to everyday ideology of this exact "critical" disposition (its reflexive distancing from the spontaneous thought-forms of everyday life) is not properly opposed to everyday ideology but is really a core part of it and must be reflected as such. In this way, critique and reflexive distancing is an integral part of everyday ideology, and it surfaces even stronger in existential difficulties, generally, as a desire for merited knowledge beyond the quotidian, i.e., when the spontaneity of its immediate reality is contested and disrupted, thus proving itself fragile and unsatisfactory.

The subject-science of critical psychology

In both German-Nordic Critical Psychology (GNCP) and cognitive behavioral therapy, anxiety is a pivotal concept, although with very different presumptions and implications. As such, no theory can propose a concept of anxiety without having reflected upon – or at least made assumptions about – what constitutes the human subject and its societal condition. First, I will briefly outline the concept of subjectivity within GNCP and, secondly, how this framework can provide us with a relevant background against which the concept of anxiety within cognitive behavioral therapy can be reflected.

In the tradition of GNCP, there are two theoretical aspects to the concept of subjectivity. The first one is the concept of *agency*, entailing "the production, the forming, and the proactive control of life conditions, which is the co-operative praxis specific to humans, and which is *distributed* among individual subjects who participate in it" (Nissen, 2005, p 152). Agency implies a participating subject striving for self-determination, a desire for agency, but it can only influence the conditions relevant for *its own existence* relative to its possibilities of influencing *the general conditions* (Nissen, 2002). The concept of emotionality was formulated to take into account and specify the intricacies of agency: how the subject is confronted with *double possibilities* in existentially relevant situations presenting it with "'restrictive' and 'generalized' alternatives either to seek action potence [agency] within the limits of given or allowed conditions or to develop it through the expansion of the existing framework" (Maiers, 1991, pp. 44). Emotionality conceptualizes this duplicity of possibility in a spectrum of anxiety and motivation, outlining whether the subject expects a loss or an expansion of its relative agency. The subject would attempt to either maintain or expand its relative level of self-determination by transacting its influence on the existing framework of conditions (Holzkamp, 2005; Nissen, 2002).

The second and *reflexive* aspect of subjectivity entails that "the subject is knowable and relates to her own actions, as well as to the actions of others, not as givens or necessities, but as options" (Nissen, 2005, p. 152). Both aspects of subjectivity – agency and reflexivity – are mediated by meanings, that is, agency is "socially generalized and externalized in material form (in artefacts) as cultural objects" (Nissen, 2005, p. 153). As such, subjects are not constituted merely through their participation in particular social relations and practices but through their engagement in *structures of ideology*. By participating in the production of objects and their meaning – in *practices of objectification* – subjects also co-constitute the framework of conditions relevant for their own existence (Nissen, 2018; 2019). This approach conceptually interconnects the objectivity (the general framework of conditions) and the subjectivity (the individual being and existence) implied with the concept of ideology. Subjective agency, i.e., individuals' influence over general conditions, takes an objective form, and these objects then serve as reflexive intermediaries between the subject and its (relation to its) agency. Objectively, agency is distributed materially with the production of objects and their meaning, but subjectively individuals relate to their agency through both the possibilities for their participatory influence, and too their own and others' concrete actions. Actions implies, in this sense, a crucial reflexive premise and distinction in that they are not determinate necessities but constitute meaningful pivots of both enacted and imagined (im-)possibilities of agency.

Being reflexive means that subjects do not simply 'have' or 'lack' agency, but that the existential agency of individuals are situated in *collective* ways of relating to their participatory possibilities and limitations. Here, the double sidedness of agency, i.e. the emotionality of anxiety (restrictive agency) and motivation (expansive agency), also warrants a distinction with respect to reflexivity. In GNCP, this is articulated with the cognitive categories of *comprehensive* and *interpretative thinking* (Holzkamp, 2005; Tolman, 1991). Interpretative thinking is in many ways analogous to anxiety, albeit here restrictivity emerges as the ways of thinking "in which a pragmatic order is brought to superficial conditions, relations are simplified and personalized, and threats to action potence [agency] and the quality of life are interpreted as arising where they are experienced as a being changeable there as well, namely in the life world" (Maiers, 1991, p. 45). On the other hand, comprehensive thinking transgresses this immediate and personalized life world as it entails on a non-evident and critical understanding of the determinant social and societal context namely of the life world of the subject. Agency can thus be conquered on this premise of subjects critically (re-)establishing their *personal relations* to the *collective conditions* relevant for each their own lives.

On this theoretical background, anxiety is an ambiguous concept and entails a rather contingent duality: not only does the possibility of being anxious emerge with the boundaries of meaning that subjects themselves produce and live by in their everyday lives; but in the advent of experiencing anxiety, emotions themselves become susceptible to objectification and meaning. In an increasingly psychologizing culture, anxiety appears both cognitively and emotionally – *in front of and behind the subject*. More specifically, the emotionality of anxiety (behind the subject) encircles an ideological deadlock of a subject whose existential conditions are out of its grasp and thus determined by others; and yet, the experience of disorientation and emotional excitation that characterize this anxious situation is also constituted in ideology as a particular kind of object (in front of

the subject) meant to reflect and represent its anxiety. Anxiety is cultivated as an object of meaning for subjects to make sense of their existential situation through distinct forms of emotional (self-)interpretation. Precariously, these objects are now involved in the constitution of a new form of subjectivity where individuals might relate in new ways to the possibilities of their situation, especially in the context of their anxiety and how psychology becomes a relevant protagonist of hope and handling. With this outset, we must dare question the ideology of anxiety; how it is reflected and interpreted, how these interpretations transform and constitute subjects in particular relationships with their anxiety, and what this very relationship *with* their anxiety (reflexively, *in front of them*) means *for* their anxiety (emotionally, *behind them*).

Post-psychology: A critical psychology on the subject of psychology

This very question is also the offset for a post-psychology: by virtue of the prefix *post*, it immediately signifies a psychology *after* psychology, although it really transposes psychology as a discipline to both include, dispense with, and transcend itself (Staunæs & Juelskjær, 2014). With subtle connotations to Hegel's sublation, this movement, as a reflexive maneuver, entails a critical self-negation as a means of self-overcoming (the immanent critique of ideology, cf. Zizek, 2008b). Psychology itself must overcome the restricting naivety of pop psychologies refraining from reflecting their own social functioning and the ideological preconditions that situate it. As coined by Klaus Holzkamp, the latent functionalism of psychology has led to formations of knowledge in *fixation of immediacy*, that is, where the social and societal background of human existence is neglected rather than reflected and taken up as relevant within these forms of knowledge (1983; Dreier, 2007).

As a discipline of psychology, post-psychology still engages with (1) how human beings experience, think, act, and feel, but it also engages with (2) how the discipline of psychology is already occupied with and entangled in these affairs. Even more so, the sublation of post-psychology means to critically interrogate (3) how the discipline psychology constitutes a social practice affording scientific-expertise that can be politically, professionally, existentially employed and therefore come to influence (1) how we experience, think, act, and feel. Post-psychology must therefore dare to criticize the theorizing practice of psychology immanently, as a practice and discipline belonging to the ranks of psychology itself. That is, post-psychology should reflect and articulate how psychology constitute its objects in the wealth of the social interests implied, but also, crucially, it "should *affirm* the criticized as relevant, as worthy of attention and rearticulation" (Nissen, 2020, p. 69). Concepts such as anxiety or motivation should be taken up and criticized because of their social promises and relevance, albeit self-questioning this relevance and its ideological preconditions. Bluntly put, the bourgeois implications and functioning of pop psychology means to not reflect the internal psychological questioning but to presume its epistemic framework as an outset to find relevant answers. The promise of a more immersive critical standpoint in philosophy is, as the Slovene philosopher Slavoj Zizek coins it, that we need philosophy not because it gives us *better answers* but because it allows us to ask *better questions* (2012b).

To be sure, post-psychology allows us to question the ways in which psychological questions, problems, and objects are practically determined and reflexively thought of in and through the resourceful ingenuity of psy-disciplinary preoccupations. Yet, as Nissen

states, we cannot except this critique from reflection either as it too casts a "shadow of power"; we ought to regard theorizing as democratic social engineering, thus entailing that "the discursive effects of psychological theory must be reflected [...] from the inside" (2012, p. 26). Post-psychology makes it possible to articulate this ambiguity, allowing us to question partly how the relevance of psychological knowledge is situated by anxiety (amongst other phenomena) as a conductor for the resonance of the psy-discourse as a scientific-expertise remedy; and, partly, how this discourse comes to constitute a social practice around anxiety as an object collectively antagonized as a problem to be overcome in accordance with the remedy it provides. This was already illustrated with my reproach to Madsen's propagations on anxiety starting in medias res: he never reflected his questioning but instead began, as it were, by laying out a series of answers as immediate useful interpretations that presume and stabilize a precarious consensus on anxiety that remains bracketed but nonetheless with an attempt to influence the modes of (self-)interpretation of his readers.

With this essay, I will discuss how the psy-discourse begins in those forms of reflexivity that is implied with the spontaneity of everyday ideology. In short, I will argue that we must retrace the existential "resonance" of psy not just to our initial forms of everyday ideology, but to the general forms of despair that situate them both and lingers as a common denominator that affords their social link. Neither existentialism nor psychoanalysis is foreign to the tradition of German-Nordic Critical Psychology (GNCP), not least with Ute Osterkamp's reinterpretations of Freud and through her own concepts of motivation and needs (this was further elaborated by Nissen, 2023 based on the works of Osterkamp, 1975, 1976). Even in Klaus Holzkamp's foundation of GNCP, he emphasized how "the collective work of Marxist psychologists lie on the level of the subject-scientific problem [...] and that in this there were no way around psychoanalysis" (1991, p. 101).

As has already been shown, the concept of ideology is a pivotal legacy of Marxism, and, as such, I will try to expand upon the hitherto outlined concept of reflexivity and emotionality by rearticulating the Kierkegaardian concept of despair through the Marxist-Lacanian perspectives of Zizek. These existentialist considerations have so far been more implicit and vaguer, and are contoured in concepts such as subjective situation, subjective well-being, individual existence etc., which, in line with the general ambitions of psychoanalysis, were taken up later as basis for a "critical" approach to psychotherapy (cf. Dreier, 2008). This essay will first and foremost be a venture, but it also seems like quite the task, at least initially. Through post-psychology, especially the works of Nissen and Osterkamp, Zizek seems to be able to close a gap between the existentialism of Kierkegaard and a Marxist-Hegelian (post-) psychology revolving around the subjectivity of participation (cf. Nissen, 2012). It has been quoted extensively in the research building on Holzkamp, here translated by Osterkamp, that "knowledge of the societal reality and knowledge of oneself are [...] 'in certain ways, two sides of the same cognitive process, genuine societal knowledge always implies self-knowledge and vice versa'" (2009, p. 168). This recognition is also foundational to the overarching approaches of GNCP, to "analyze emotionality, i.e., to deconstruct its composite quality and reconstruct its specific conditional modes to their objective causes, making it possible to influence the subjective well-being in accordance herewith by transforming objective reality" (Osterkamp, 1979, p. 242, author's translation).

Thus, the inevitably of psychoanalysis in this critical task was already present from the beginning of GNCP, as Holzkamp emphasized,

> the basic theoretical concepts of psychoanalysis [...] have the virtual function of "means" by which, "in dealing with oneself," the appearance of one's subjective situation [Befindlichkeit] can be analyzed to reveal its inherent dependencies, conflicts, denials, compulsions, and circumscriptions, thus allowing the person to achieve a more conscious, reflective, and responsible life practice (1991, p. 91).

As we shall see, this "dealing with oneself" entails a two-sidedness when it comes to anxiety. Not only does the emotionality of anxiety articulated in GNCP constitute a conceptual canvas of subjective "well-being" that calls us to reconstruct and interrogate social reality; but, in doing so, anxiety is constituted as an object that is meant to reflect something about the subject and its "well-being". This object thus inevitably becomes a part of the social reality it was meant to reflect, perhaps even transforming it in the process. This means, firstly, that there is ideology to every concept of anxiety deployed, as these become relevant objects for the subjects and collectives they are about; secondly, the practices who deploy these objects are both reflected and transformed. The objects feed back into the social reality of subjects and collectives and thus into their "well-being". What must be questioned here, is how those predominating forms of thinking about anxiety reflects and latently reproduce social reality. As such, even in the reflection and naming of anxiety, social reality is put into action in ways that cover up its own preliminary functioning, and thus the psy-discourse ends up neglecting its own influence on subjective "well-being" rather than purposely reconstructing its composition.

The threat of emotions

As already mentioned, functionalism plays an integral role for the theories of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and, too, for the later developments of meta-cognitive therapy (MCT) in the so-called "third wave" of CBT (Batmaz, 2014). The first core principle shared amongst these therapeutic approaches is that "any emotional reaction, e.g., anxiety or depression, is considered as a signal that points out to the discrepancy between self-regulation and of threats to well-being" (Batmaz, 2014, p. 15). As such, threats to well-being call for self-regulation – thus pointed out – *not* to regulate any "objective circumstances" of subjective well-being, but to regulate the self-limiting experience of negative emotion as the real source of danger to individuals. In the advent of experiencing anxiety, a discrepancy presents itself: self-regulation is not considered to be a general expectancy but emerges as (psychological, pedagogical, therapeutic) inquiry only in the demand for it. More precisely, when regarded as a negative emotional reaction, anxiety is first and foremost an experience, and as experience it is seen to indicate that self-regulation itself has become a threat to well-being. The emergence of anxiety is seen to directly prove that self-regulation has broken down, and the persistence and intensity of its presence points only to the extent of the breakage. In this way, anxiety serves both as cause and consequence, thus expressively *proving* ill self-regulation, this also becomes the natural target of intervention, attempting to bring back into balance what has gone out of function – or rather, what has become *dys*functional. Even though the practice of CBT itself can be seen as critical, mobilizing a wealth of actors and institutions, bringing about reflections of a hope, yet its analyses are only negative. Nissen perfectly coins this view,

in that "[t]hey are retrospective oriented and seem to convey a certain sense of resentment for the present and longing for not just an utopia, but a retropia; a dream of what once (never) was" (2020, p. 69).

Anxiety brings about and represents a form of dysfunction that depends in various ways on the forms of conduct that are regarded to be proper functional. Therefore, the literature on anxiety predictability and treatment is preoccupied with different forms of anxiety across different ages and life circumstances: the separation anxiety of the toddler, the ritualized behavior of the older child, and the tendency of avoidance and social retention with adolescents and adults (cf. Thastum, 2018). It is argued that anxiety and worrying is adaptive, enabling us to avoid dangers, and yet too much anxiety often has a negative impact on our everyday lives and daily functioning. It is this functioning of everyday life that constitutes the measurement for the pathology of anxiety, i.e., the background against which the disturbance and interference of anxiety is recognized. In this way, anxiety is not seen to be pathological in and of itself: what distinguishes the pathological form of anxiety from the "normal" one (which is really only represented as non-pathological, rather than proper normality) is the degree of its intrusiveness. This form of "normal" anxiety is to be formally accepted as it usually passes over quickly and might even be expected in certain ages and transitions in life (Breinholst, Christiansen & Esbjørn, 2018).

This proposition also constitutes a pivotal paradox: a door is opened for anxiety to be interpreted as a reasonable and expected reaction, and yet, at the same time, the possibility to relevantly carry out such an interpretation is respectively cut off. Even in the case of "normal" anxiety, the child ought to learn that its fear and anxiety is irrational, and that there is really nothing to be afraid of (Breinholst, Christiansen & Esbjørn, 2018). The pathological and the "normal" anxiety are both seen to be characterized by an excessive irrationality regardless how reasonable or well-justified it might seem. More specifically, when the spontaneous functioning of everyday life constitutes the measurement of pathology (or dysfunction), anxiety can never properly or positively be seen as functional.

Staying true to this measurement – thus leaving the societal premises of individual everyday life unquestioned – we see that only those elements that intrude and disturb individuals' everyday functioning can be *reasonably* regarded as a threat, amongst which anxiety itself is seen to belong. In this way, the prevailing (relevant) societal conditions for everyday life is tacitly assumed to be immutable, thus necessitating processes of subordination in and through treating emotions "as a general source of danger, which must be overcome or at least reined within the individual, i.e., kept away from being transacted concretely" (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1979, p. 258, author's translation). When the ill-being *of* the anxious subject is determined as the problem *for* the anxious subject, this leaves acceptance and commitment to its given existential conditions to be the only means of paving a way for positive emotional assessment. This does not mean, at least not directly, that the psy-discourse means to harm, but its conception of positive emotional assessment recognizes "positivity" only in its spontaneous inseparability from the conditions of a given social reality. As such, it is latently assumed that keeping given conditions intact is intimately tied together with the maintenance of subjective positivity, and that the individual should be encouraged in taking their part their upholding. This is also seen with CBT's resentment for the present, i.e., in its very own ideological raison d'être, that it is

called into action and answers when it is certain that emotional life is what needs to be "fixed".

Following how anxiety is conveyed only through its dysfunction, it remains negatively mediated by its disruptive impact on the necessities of everyday life. Conversely, the notion of function only seems to reflect a tacit expectation for subjects to have a positive emotional attitude towards prevailing conditions, thus "any deviations from this expectation must be blamed solely on the individual as an expression of subjective emotional delusion" (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1979, p. 258, author's translation). As stated previously, this practically keeps any form of anxiety from being reasonable or warranted, at least to the extent that anxiety itself is to be seen as a threat to subjective well-being, consequently objectifying anxiety to positively not make any sense - that it cannot be sensible if it is also that which must be defeated. The functionalist propositions of CBT entails addressing anxiety in ways that mobilize everyday life adaptation, encouraging it, as the negativity of an image that represents the ideal form of subjectivity. We thus see an image that orients the practice of treating disturbances of delusion and emotional dysfunctioning "not as a problem of whether the individual can regain its self-control by expanding its active influence of the relevant life conditions, but only as a problem of whether it can reduce its emotional excitation and change its attitude to the given external conditions " (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1979, p. 255, author's translation). To be sure, this emotional excitation of anxiety is posited as the core problem; it is the obstacle of the subject assuming its proper place, which simultaneously asserts the existence of this very place for the subject to long for. This antagonization of anxiety, in a Zizekian sense, is actively a part of constituting the very social reality it idealizes – a reality that allegedly *would* have been actuality if it had not been blocked, lost, taken away by anxiety (Zizek, 2019). From this view, the presence of anxiety proves that individual adaptation has already failed, and it is from this precarious situation that anxiety derives its meaning as it comes to constitute the interpretative background for its objectification. More specifically, the idealization of adaptation situates our understanding of anxiety in the psy-discourse, and we recognize it only as an excessive threat to the (restrictive) forms of participation of which it is already an expression.

Representing adaptation as a hope

Within the discourse of CBT, the subject is encouraged to idealize adaptation by means of the interpretations offered, to consider its own (*mis-*)interpretations, conduct, and emotional life as unfounded and out-of-context, constituting a social practice of self-regulation around targeting anxiety as the obstacle of the individual's subjective well-being. A relevant aspect of this form of practice is what CBT itself calls "socialization" - what is otherwise also known as psychoeducation (Breinholst, Christensen & Esbjørn, 2018; Verner & Hansen, 2021). For the subject to participate "competently" within the confines of therapy, the subject must be educated on its emotional and cognitive inner life (this was also analyzed extensively in Illouz, 2008). Even though CBT tends to articulate this "socialization" as a mere *introduction* to its scientific-expertise forms of knowledge, it is nonetheless central for this practice to engage its subjects in understanding the relationship between their emotions, cognitions, behavior, and bodily symptoms. Only with this "introduction" will subjects be able to put their feelings and experiences into discourse, enacting the principle that the way "to help the child regulate its feelings, is to

put those feelings into words" (Breinholst, Christiansen & Esbjørn, 2018, p. 21-22, author's translation). As such, the general reasoning behind the "introduction" of this discourse is to provide "the child and the family with a framework to understand their problem, as well as a common language and foundation with the therapist to work with this problem" (Breinholst, Christiansen & Esbjørn, 2018, p. 22, author's translation). This common language and framework not only establish a (self-)interpretative relationship between the subject and its anxiety, but even more radically it works as a means of social integration, as a form of ideology, whereby the practice of CBT itself has (re-)cognitive implications for the subject's anxiety. The practice of interpretation not only makes sense of anxiety but objectifies it, constituting it as an object relevant for the relationships of participation it mediates. Anxiety becomes an object for subjects to engage with collectively, mediating and (trans-)forming those very subjects and collectives (Nissen, 2018; 2019).

To be sure, the subjective assumption of anxiety as a (self-)interpretative framework not only subsumes anxiety as an object for the ideologies of those who employ it, but it also reconfigures their ideologies, offering new forms of meaning. With the concept of anxiety offered in CBT, subjects might do something new, they might seek out a therapist, form new relationships with their parents, teachers, co-workers, partners, etc. This is the fundamental objectivity of ideology, that objects of meaning are transformative: the American Lacanian psychoanalyst Joan Copjec phrased is a matter of ideology *acting* on its subjects (1994). One interprets one's existential situation by assuming anxiety as an intrusive locus, having disrupted one's usual everyday life, whereby, in order to regain control, anxiety must be conquered. In short, the psychological ideology of anxiety is a call for subjects to consider themselves amongst the ranks of a collective by recognizing its common cause (Zizek, 2006a).

This attempt to regain what has purportedly been lost is a dynamic of recovery also present with Derrida's concept of the *pharmakon*: "This pharmakon, this 'medicine,' this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent" (1981, p. 70). To put it more succinctly, CBT's (self-)interpretative framework *works like a charm*; the enactment of subjects appropriating the discourse as a *discourse of themselves*, is an appropriation drenched in the fascination of its satisfactory and recognitive promises – a hope. The framework allows its subjects to see, but it must also blind them to how this framework, and thus their own sensuousness, draws on and is supported by certain forms of recognized participation; with a subject suffering from anxiety, "we" agree not only on the typicality (pathology) of the problem, but "we", the (healthy) collective around this subject, also sympathize with the subject in suffering. More generally, for this framing of anxiety to work it must also cover up the very act of its framing, i.e., obfuscating the common-sense of its antagonizing attitude towards anxiety. Similarly, the beneficent or maleficent ambiguity of the discursive ingestion is retraceable not only to the modal of sickness it was supposed to remedy, but, even more radically, to the subject's own understanding that its situation is a matter of sickness. This modal of pathologizing constitutes a pivotal premise for the anticipation of a scientific-expertise remedy – only in this way can the psy-discourse assume its protagonistic framing, as if it was a gift endowed with special powers (Zizek, 2006a).

This special power of ideology is the promise to relieve emotional deprivation, to pick up the pieces of a reality that has fallen apart and to replace disorientation and existential confusion with one concise and unitary figure; in ideology, everything becomes clear, "we are presented with an image that fixates our awareness, and then this image can mobilize us" (Finnes, 2012). In other words, the subject could not have been disoriented with the advent of anxiety if it hadn't already been somewhat sensibly oriented. To be sure, anxiety is not simply a *dis*orientation of a reflexive subject that is left in an abstract lack of orientation; the disorientation that emerges with anxiety, as pointed out by Osterkamp, also connotes a concrete *de*-orientation, a dissolution of a determinate reflexive subjectivity. In this way, anxiety implies a dialectic negativity of becoming, signifying both the closure, the overcoming and the opening of ideological reorientation: anxiety is the preliminary precondition of subjective reconstitution. In this precise sense, there is something immanently critical, albeit negatively, to the emotionality of anxiety and what it signifies, but here, we must not move too quickly from the closure and overcoming of subjectivity to its reconstitution.

To understand this next movement of reconstitution, we must reflect this preliminary wound of anxiety in subjective becoming that situates its overcoming. This builds on the ideas of Osterkamp, which was later expanded on by Nissen (cf. 2002; 2012), that the "general disorientation of the behavior is a significant groundwork for the individual to be manipulated by others since, in this situation, they are so to speak 'grateful' for any behavioral orientation offered as a means of achieving social recognition" (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1979, p. 259, author's translation). More specifically, with anxiety opening up this wound of negativity in subjective becoming, we see the carving of a precarious nonspace of the subject *being-no-more* (the closure) and *being-not-yet* (the opening). The subject would find itself torn and stuck between the "subjectivity that was" (but has ended) and the "subjectivity to come" (but has not begun). This nonspace is thus as ambivalent as it is ambiguous: in trying to understand the situation of this form of subjectivity, we see that it is represented by *both* the "subjectivity that was" *and* the "subjectivity to come," seeing that both are reflect this preliminary position. And at the same time, the subject is represented by *neither* the "subjectivity that was" *nor* the "subjectivity to come", seeing that the subject finds itself outside their symbolic vicinity. The overcoming of development that closes this gaping wound, i.e., from the closure of its dissolution to the opening of its reconstitution, is not a mere transition.

What we are missing here, as Kierkegaard pointed out, is the articulation of anxiety as an intermediary (1980). Nissen outlines this critical momentality of development, albeit without explicit reference to anxiety, as the negative and positive processual determinants implied in subjective reconstitution:

> This processual determinacy implies that the subject *after*, i.e., in the positive moment of critique, is recognized and recognizes itself through an objectification that necessarily implies a simultaneous alienation from the subject *before*, i.e., from the self that was objectified. And the other way around, the critiqued subject only sees the negative moment of the critique, taken for itself, as a decomposition or dissolution (2002, p. 81, author's translation).

This process of dissolution and reconstitution through *critical momentality* is what we can generally regard as psychological development or existential becoming. However, with Kierkegaard, the radical status of anxiety as an intermediary also allows us to question how these negative and positive moments of development must also have a beginning: that at some point, there must have been a primordial or a "first" constitution of the subject that was not itself a *re*constitution, encircling the genesis of subjectivity whose constitution has not yet implied its integral dissolutive (anti-/) thesis. At this moment, the status of anxiety as an intermediary still stands, but, initially, between what? Kierkegaard's answer is here very clear: the preliminary anxiety of the first constitution does not point to the dissolution of *something* but of *nothing*. The first constitution, or the individual's initial fall into sin in Kierkegaardian terms, was taken up as a pivotal theoretical problem that was already present in Lacan's psychoanalysis (and thus in its later developments, cf. Zizek, 2005; 2006c). The dialectical implications here entails that we can retrace the development of the subject through the mo(ve)ments of its respective negative and positive processes until we, at some point, find ourselves retracing the becoming of a subject that began with the dissolution of nothing. This rather complicated issue will not be taken up further in this essay but might hold great promise for later inquiries into Kierkegaard – perhaps through Zizekian readings – as a potentially relevant contribution to an existentialist critique of ideology.

Returning to CBT, the disorientation of the subject that Osterkamp emphasizes, and that we can now rearticulate as a characteristic of the dissolution implied with the anxious subject, comes to serve as the existential opening for the discourse of psy. However, when we regard this discourse as a form of ideology, it is necessary to question both sides with respect to the meaning of anxiety. This entails, firstly, that we must ask what the concepts and thought-forms within CBT are "generalized-being-made-for" by means of their affordances; and, secondly, how subjects come to make sense of these meanings (Nissen, 2012, p. 118). The latter, I will not delve into here, as this calls for deeper empirical studies, but, on the other hand, the educative principles of CBT are exemplary demonstrations of how these therapeutic affordances appeals to "sense-making". For instance, in the widely renowned model referred to as the cognitive triangle or diamond, we see that cognition, emotion, and behavior are depicted and described in their immediate relationship with each other. This affords its users to assess those composite *situations* in which their state of being needs altering. As is told, the model can serve as a "starting point for how the child itself, its parents, or the therapist wishes for the child to react and think in this situation forward" (Breinholst, Christiansen & Esbjørn, 2018, p. 22, author's translation). These interests actively shape the particular behavioral reorientation afforded, and its effect thus radically depends on the extent that this behavior and thinking is (already) tied to social recognition.

The objective of adaptation implied with behavioral reorientation is presented with the staging of "proper functioning" for the purpose of reflecting it as a goal, a motive, a hope of therapy; the social recognition implied, even on the mere cognitive level of interpretation, is nothing but a (perhaps disclosing) incitation for the subject to recognize the forms of participation it was already expected to enact. The philter of recognition is therefore present already with the reorientation of its reflexive categories. Zizek encircles this point by expanding on Althusser's concept of interpellation through Lacan, that it is precisely reorientation, reflexively, that constitutes the true moment of subjection, i.e.,

with the subject recognizing itself and its predicament in the psy-discourse (Zizek, 2006a). It is, however, a rather vital aspect that this interpretative discourse remains a philter only by means of its promising outlook for (the semblance of) moral integrity that comes with the "good position" of being socially recognized as "someone" who suffers from anxiety. As such, it is with this antagonistic attitude towards anxiety in therapeutic knowledge that the promise of social recognition depends and is put into work.

This functioning of knowledge was already laid out by Danziger, that these models and ways of thinking are crucial in the forming of a "coherent framework for representing a kind of knowledge that is regarded as true and a kind of practice regarded as legitimate (1997, p. 13). For therapy, its scientific legitimacy is not irrelevant for stabilizing its professionalized status, drawing precarious attention to various references, e.g., the brain, the nervous system, evolution – often an amalgamation of all of them – as a way of supporting their views through networks scientific references. On a more anecdotal note, this reminds me of a personal encounter I had with a priest at a dinner, and he was very skeptical and argumentative towards atheists (whom I tend to represent when I'm in the right mood). He insisted on telling me stories upon stories, myths, and religious experiences as if he were building up a case in accusation of my views. In the end, I asked him if all of this was supposed to convince me or to prove the existence of God, because then I was not really sure that he had succeeded. Insulted, he replied quite brilliantly: "Well, all of this *does in fact* prove God's existence, but maybe you'd have to be a christian to see it". In certain ways, there is a parallel to the forms of objectivity implied and referenced when aspiring to base therapy on evidence; first, one formally rejects the ideological precondition of one's own (immediately *neutral)* conviction, and only *then* it becomes a pressing matter to legitimate and make evident those forms of knowledges and practices in which one already believes. As we shall see in the next section, this rejection of being "ideological" is not a superficial social statement, but constitutes a fundamental critical distance built into the ideology of the psy-discourse.

Objectivity from the standpoint of spontaneity

Following Zizek, the process of knowledge acquiring social legitimacy by means of framing its discourse as scientific also implies emphasizing that the truth of this knowledge stems not from its immediate resonance but from a neutral line of thought, a privileged place that is "somehow exempted from the turmoils of social life, which enables some subject-agent to perceive the very hidden mechanism that regulates social visibility and non-visibility" (Zizek, 1994, p. 3). This place is obviously an overt case of ideology, but it also means that the rejection of being ideological is not socially innocent. In CBT, this rejection allows for the (re)configuring of particular social arrangements, as a resource that is as natural as it is vital in justifying the cause of its practice and the (forming of) collectives. However, as the priest blatantly demonstrated, it is not through knowledge that we are led to believe in a cause or a common-sense is established, but it is only when we already believe in this cause that knowledge can meaningfully support it. It is thus not necessary for CBT to argue the "objectivity" of their discourse as it does not begin with an empty canvas; it does in fact establish a common-sense, but only precariously through the appeals of its ideological cause to the conduct of people's everyday lives. This appeal then allows for the discourse to expansively transgress the boundaries between therapy and everyday ideology.

It is thus the appeal to everyday ideology that the psy-discourse of therapy can stabilize and justify its cause and its meanings, thereby allowing for the bracketing that its relevance is in fact ideological. Here, the objectivity of anxiety can be viewed as a *boundary objectivity* as proposed by Nissen (2023). This concept implies that the meaning of anxiety is both situated by practices who pragmatically accepts the psy-discourse, which in turn also situates those practices by organizing them; meaning thus implies that "objectivity is established by aligning divergent and opposing subjective viewpoints, interests, and pursuits" (2023, p. 20). This means that anxiety – as a boundary object – can be prevalent and relevant in different forms in and across different practices who are composed of different interests and agents. The objectivity of anxiety can both maintains its boundary form by establishing links between bounded practices and the psy-discourse, whilst enabling those practices to project different pragmatic content.

As a boundary object, anxiety entails an opening of collaboration that can (trans-)form the practices in which it is made relevant, but this also means – on a purely theoretical level – that we cannot simply infer from theoretical accounts how subjectivity is shaped and altered, nor how these objects are made sensible or relevant. In CBT, the alleged "objectivity" of its discourse is almost exclusively expressed in the inherent bracketing of the interests and pursuits reflected in its naturalizing attitude. This is an overt case of ideology specific for scientific-expertise as its interpretative discourse tentatively accedes to a place where it is left undisputed and in no need of scrutiny. At least not to those practices who would find it meaningful. Its appeal to govern and care for the boundaries of everyday ideology (even in their unreflected form) is the locus of its objectivity and social legitimacy; the natural bracketing of anxiety is (too) easily secured by the very claim of caring about keeping everyday life intact. But we also don't see any interest for the preconditions of its disruption.

Even though it is minimally articulated within CBT itself, the discourse does draw the contours of a 'we', e.g., reflected in the introductory "socialization" necessary for establishing a common sense that transgress the immediacy of everyday life in order to "intentionalize" the relevant agents of the therapeutic intervention: "The immediacy of common *sense* is broken in favor of a troublesome construction yet also individuation of *meaning*, which may, in turn, come to rule as the 'ideological' common sense of a new collective" (Nissen, 2023, p. 126). To be sure, with the promises of CBT appealing to the integrity of everyday ideology, the common sense of each must also be reflected with respect to the other: the internally bounded sense of everyday life is maintained in the emergence of a new transboundary collective in which anxiety is objectified and embraced as natural exteriority. In this way, CBT mobilizes its subjects by means of supporting their externalizing effort, thus constituting a framework of psychologically modified objects (anxiety, emotion, behavior, cognition, etc.) that structure a common cause.

In parallel to Zizek's reception of psychoanalysis, Foucault too emphasized that with language and the embrace of discourse one also embraces the rules that constitute one's formation as subject. As previously established, these rules are obfuscated – they are neutralized, naturalized – as part of the symbolic exchange: subjects accept language as a salutary gift, with all its values and practical applications, *as if there were no strings attached* (Zizek, 2006a). We might just say that there is deception fundamentally implied in the very exchange on which subjectivity is founded "[f]or these gifts are already

symbols, in the sense that symbols means pact and that they are first and foremost signifiers of the pact they constitute as signified" (Zizek, 2006a, p. 7). Through Nissen, this is the foundational collective precondition of intersubjectivity, that its objectivity is a "'*boundary objectivity*' organized around boundary objects", and that there is social exchange implied with the transgressing and transforming of the boundaries of subjects and collectives (Nissen, 2023, p. 20).

The concept of boundary objectivity proposed by Nissen (2004; 2009; 2012) builds on the work of Susan Leigh Star amongst others (Bowker & Star, 1999). However, the concept of ideology, and not least the notion that objects tend to have different meanings, is a pervasive point that one might find throughout different approaches to mental health and well-being. For instance, it is articulated as an object's holographic quality (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008) or its polyamorosity (Chapman, 2015). What often tends to be a main issue with objects and their meaning is their very content, which, in pop psychology, are often seen with the most fundamental of concepts, e.g., what it means to be well or unwell, health or unhealthy. However, as wide arrays of literature have shown, these concepts are often accepted on the common sense of their hollow content, so that all we are left with are positive and negative references and (dis-/) connections with other hollow concepts. Thus, the most common of concepts cannot be too radical or concrete in its meaning as this would put it all too sharply in contrast to other forms of meaning: e.g., well-being must preserve a distinct vagueness that renders it adequately hollow for different practice to find it relevant and applicable for each their own intents and purposes.

This was demonstrated by Linda Graham (2015) in her article called "To Be Well Is to Be Not Unwell", where even the naming makes this point very clear. She showed how a wealth of psychological concepts functions in a network of intricate relations and references to one another, but often without any substantive theoretical content, only this hollow resonance of the common or oppositional sense between hollow concepts. Her chapter was part of a larger anthology in which Amy Chapman (2015) went closer in on the forms of normativity implied with the common sense of concepts such as wellbeing. Chapman states that this conceptual hollowness is appealing because its "polyamorous nature lends itself to various explanations", and thus it affords its regurgitators to state an interest in something obviously positive, but this really obfuscates a much larger battleground about which disciplines and explanations it belongs to. Even further, this was demonstrated to often reflect underlying political contradictions on what the most fundamental of institutions such as schools and education should really be about. This was already argued by Nicolas Rose who noted this inherent feature of the psy-discourse, that its social raison d'être and mainstream proliferation stems from its "capacity to lend itself freely to others who will borrow it because of what it offers to them in the way of a justification and guide to action" (1996, p. 87). As such, the contradictions of the social field is already built into the very concepts and theories that would frame this quarrel as purely a matter of appropriate scientific-expertise, implying that such a "neutral" approach could purportedly free social issues from their quotidian or political discord.

Even though Foucault would approach this issue from a different angle, the (trans)formative aspect of psy-knowledge and how we are led to believe its "neutral" framework is distinctly similar to his interrogation of the scientific unconscious and the categories fundamental to modernity. As Foucault would argue, the influences and

implicit philosophies employed in science are dependently non-articulated (that is, the scientific discourse to some extent depends on *not* articulating its underlying framework) which means that it can only ever return as something that resists, deflects, and disturbs scientific discourse itself (1994). Conversely, what Foucault sought for was to articulate a *positive unconscious*: "a level [of knowledge] that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature" (1994, p. xi-xii). The critical insight to take from this, building on Zizek's "privileged place," is for us to recognize that the social role of psychology does not lie outside its scientificity. Its sociality is already inside it, eluding and disturbing its discourse as an intruder that frustrates its aim and advances its desire for neutrality (Zizek, 2006b). This could relevantly be said for the present state of the unconscious of the psy-discourse, but as Foucault would argue, this does not mean that the scientific (even in its lay or everyday modal) is ipso facto a problem. Foucault's proposal of the positive unconscious means partly that we should, positively, interrogate the unconscious desire of scientific pursuits (precisely because there *is* desire there); and partly, that this desire does not have to be restrictive or repressive. As such, we should view the unconscious *first as fact, then as problem*. The positive unconscious reflects both the need to scrutinize the interests implied with any scientific endeavor, and the hope that we might overcome of its intrusiveness by externalizing it as an object for reflection. Thus, its potential intrusiveness that must be allocated to its proper place, namely that of the scientific discourse itself and its relation to its own unconscious. With the scientific-expertise of the psy-disciplines, we must first posit the unconscious as immanent and then embark on the critical task of disclosing the societal preconditions beyond the expansive polyamory of its discourse.

The vulgar view

The immediate problem of the scientific unconscious, which Lacan would specify as the unconscious of the university discourse, would superficially seem to be the fact that there is an unconscious even in scientific practices (2008). Conversely, the unconscious might constitute a vital problem, but the initial obstacle for tackling this issue is how the unconscious of the university discourse is reflected in and through the relation to its own unconscious. How would the psy-discourse, with its desire for neutrality, comprehend its own desire within its own framework? Seeing that such a recognition would compromise the very unconscious that situate this desire, the psy-discourse could not arrive at such an insight if it is also driven to prevail. The success of its desire depends on its claim of "factuality" – that its discourse is *in fact* the right one, i.e., by scientific standards.

From a subjective standpoint, the problem we are dealing with is that the psy-discourse has come to occupy the place of self-knowledge: its "factuality" has become the "objective" (boundary) objectivity of modern self-identity. It is through the "factuality" of the psy-discourse and its scientific-expertise that it accedes to this privileged place exempted from social life, allowing it to provide what is considered truthful knowledge. Conversely, we also have to grasp how existential predicament situates a desire for self-identity that engenders psy-knowledge and its "factuality" with sensible and sensitive meaning. This reflection is what proper lacks in the psy-discourse: it does not include into its object the proposition of the subjects' (self-) assertive commitment, nor its own role in promising to satisfy their desire for "factual" (self-) knowledge. As a commitment, in

parallel to the anecdote of the priest, the deployment of psy-knowledge constitutes a subjective presupposition: it reflects a belief which, as Zizek points out, "does not concern facts, but gives expression to an unconditional ethical commitment" (2006a, p. 117). The obfuscation implied in committing oneself to the psy-discourse, is that as scientific-expertise its knowledge implies a claim of social neutrality: it does not dismiss any social relevance, but it radically rejects any social precondition in the purpose of its concepts, models, programs and their evidence.

As previously outlined, there is distinct critical distance built into psy-discourse and its reflexive stance on everyday life: its reflexivity seems to transgress the spontaneous thinking of everyday ideology, but its "critical" framework also maintains the given conditions of its underlying societal embeddedness. The intricate problem with this form of critique – an *improper critique* as Kierkegaard would have coined is – is that the psy-discourse itself may indeed propose reflections on the consequences of its own constructs, categories, diagnostics etc. This would seemingly provide it with a self-reflexive questioning that qualifies this approach as "critique", but its extent remains deeply delimited by a confirmative modus: the psy-discourse's "critique" of itself must always *also* maintain the relative status of its knowledge, i.e., as scientific-expertise. More specifically, the very narrow forms of critique that the psy-discourse can muster only consists of pointing to the negative social consequences of its (valued, truthful) theoretical constructs, e.g., in the form of prejudices, marginalization, shame, or discrimination.

This confirmative modus would imply that negative social consequences are in fact disconnected from theory, and stems solely from the (alleged) political, academic, professional, and quotidian misunderstanding and misuse of any such concept. That is, when anxiety is both examined and problematized in clinical research, it is typically with a motive of qualifying the general preemptive efforts, predictability, and potential outcomes of psychological treatment. Improper critique becomes a relevant sleight of hand in this regard, when it becomes necessary for the psy-discourse to assume a "responsible" attitude that can afford its disclaim of "unfortunate" social aftermaths. Throughout Danish (professional, academic) literature on anxiety, we are urged not to forget the importance of relationships, families, and how having a sense of belong is vital for all human beings. But this also serves to establish a firm common sense against which we can measure the "proper" use of the psy-discourse. With the theoretical constructs of anxiety in CBT, it becomes relevant to ask: at what point could this importance of relationships and belonging be *properly centralized* in our understanding of wellbeing, if anxiety is at the same time seen as a threat to it?

What we encounter with this question is that the improper critique and social "responsibility" of the psy-discourse provides a distance that actually covers up its individualizing reproach and the antagonization of "ill-regulated" emotions. To be sure, we are presented with this disclaiming and distancing attitude *towards their own view* precisely to permit its use. This is the vulgarity of improper critique. To put in the terms of Kierkegaard, it is the vulgarity of an improper reflection that both preserves and gives expression to the forms of despair it was meant to overcome: *the vulgar view* is a despairing reflection with a "very poor understanding of despair" (1941, p. 21). The vulgarity of the psy-discourse and its scientific-expertise status is the confirmative responsibility that a "good" psychologist or therapist should consider the social

implications of their own truths, leaving the *social consequences* of them knowing the *"real thing"* to be the only emergent problem (Zizek, 2008a). It is a confirmative social critique, where the concept in need of "critique" also radically governs how its critique can unfold as it must also be left intact, perhaps even strengthened. To be sure, the only problem the psy-discourse can recognize are the social consequences that might follow from *this* interpretative framework being the truth, delicately reminding us that "this" *is* the truth.

In the later works of Osterkamp, she refers to this form of improper critique through Adorno, in some ways articulating the vulgar view from a Marxist standpoint, i.e., as misuse of "critique of society as an ideology for [...] private interests" (2016, p. 165). With both Osterkamp and Kierkegaard, we can point to improperness of "critique" when it is used as means of obfuscating a motive of maintaining what is given: that the scientific-expertise of the psy-discourse can reflect a confirmative stance in sustaining an already prevailing common sense. In this sense, the improper critique of the psy-discourse effectively advances the given societal preconditions of a common sense, making it more potent and prevalent *even* when it claims to be stepping out of it.

This was also the crucial insight of Zizek's notion that belief is an ethical commitment; or rather, that the subjective commitment to a distinct discourse reflects a supra- and intersubjective ethics of belief. The pseudo-critical distance that the psy-discourse brings to our everyday life does not threaten what we believe, but they afford and provide that "in our ideological everyday, our predominant attitude is one of a jeering distance towards our true beliefs" (Zizek, 2008a, p. 165). For Zizek, when the psy-discourse reflects and "critiques" the social implications of its own framework, the vulgarity is expressed with its "hypocritical sentiment of moral outrage" – a moralist outrage that enables it to get the "desired result[s] without having to suffer unpleasant side effects" (2008a, p. 6, 44). This is the most fundamental of private interests in ideology, that we can have our cake and eat it too. When critique is subordinated to the privacy of everyday ideology, it becomes immanently improper, advancing its underlying cause by *covering it up* – by keeping its ethical commitment, and what it truly believes, as a private enterprise.

An anecdote of Zizek that illustrates this functioning of ideology is that we can "have the global capitalist cake, i.e., thrive as profitable entrepreneurs, and eat it too, i.e., endorse the anti-capitalist causes of social responsibility and ecological concern" (Zizek, 2008a, p. 16). Zizek even goes onto illustrate this with the commodities in everyday life: e.g., when Starbuck's advertised that they invest in healthcare for Guatemalan children, so that "with every cup you drink, you save a child's life" (2008a, p. 6). Thus, the social responsibility represented in our most common of commodities is a counterfeit performative, not least with the mainstreamed interpretative framework of the psy-discourse; it very objectivity is inscribed with a conspicuous reassurance that it is socially and politically responsible in and of itsef, fully merging political action with consumption. This is the troublesome outlook of Zizek's reflexivization of interpretation; with the commodification of scientific-expertise, and thus with the extensive supply of psy- knowledge that encourages adaptation, this interpretative discourse has a boundless devouring and regurgitation that proliferates its currency in a reflexive business of selves.

This proliferation of the psy-discourse as a network of commodities in social exchange illustrates the pharmakon modal of Kierkegaard's vulgar view: as reflexive position it is critical abstraction, but as critique it is improper, opposed to abstracting from the potency of ideology by inciting a potentiating abstraction of a more potent ideology. As we already saw with the antagonization of anxiety, e.g., with the conception that emotions can be a threat to subjective well-being, we see that the restrictivity of ideology is not only an issue expressed with the very anxiety of the subject. With adaptation being proposed as a resolution for this situation, its initial ideological forms reemerge, they are staged with the motive of *re*covering an idealized form of participation purportedly lost with the emergence of anxiety. This advancement is the modus of potentiation of ideology, in the words of Osterkamp: "[B]y trying to maintain the impression of being morally strong or politically conscious enough to neutralize the demoralizing effects that restrictive conditions have on our behaviour, one unavoidably confirms the individualistic ideology" (2009, p. 178).

For Osterkamp, the potentiation of restrictive ideology that is reflected with our reproductive participation in it, is derivate from its appeal of moralization that tears apart "the fundamental unity of self-determination and influencing the conditions that shape our lives" (2009, p. 177). Initially, it seems counterproductive to not only participate in restrictive ideology but even more so to reproduce and reinforce its restrictivity. However, the appeal is that, with this tearing apart of the unity of self-determination, by allocating individual responsibility for individual actions, we are individually disposed of our social responsibility and involvement in maintaining general conditions of our existence. Or that is, at least to the extent that *our idea* of individual self-determination has become falsely contrasted to that of influencing the general conditions for each our own lives. In this way, moralizing is a pivotal affordance for self-preservation in individualistic ideology: with the disposing of emancipatory social responsibility surfaces only the hope for a shallow self-determination that has already been individualized and privatized. As despairing as this may seem, its persuasiveness resides with this representation that freedom is the morally neutralizing liberation of individual responsibility from the social responsibility for general societal conditions. Recognizing this liberation as a means of individual freedom thus constitutes a contradiction with regards to proper social responsibility: a precarious disrelationship "protecting us from all conflicts that we would have to face if we tried to act in accordance with this responsibility" (Osterkamp, 2019, p. 558).

The counterfeit performatives of the psy-discourse thus leave us with an immediate counterfeit responsibility: in individualistic ideology, we have a private responsibility only for ourselves, and the potentiation that the psy-discourse affords is the encouragement that we collectively recognize that this is what truly constitutes "our" "responsibility". This disrelationship and its tear of self-determination is the precondition of the Kierkegaardian subject, whose formation is constituted on this very premise of being in despair, and with a rhetoric as "if by himself and by himself only he would abolish the despair, then all the labor he expends he is only laboring himself deeper into a deeper despair" (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 10-11). The truly critical point in Kierkegaard's notion of the despairing subject, is that if we reflexively attempt to overcome the formative disrelationship of our own constitution by engaging in the reflexive-interpretative labor of individualistic ideology, we advance the very disrelationship: we are thus still *in* this ideology, advancing it by employing it for the conquering of its own demoralizing effects.

This individual conquering reflects a poor understanding of despair, but it also demonstrates how the ideology of psy-discourse appeals to our despair. Not only does it appeal to, but it presumes the *dis*relationship of the self as an entry point: what is misrecognized as a promising means of securing a minimum of self-preservation is properly the very cause of self-restraint. The laboring of the self in the name of 'psy' exposes its understanding of individual responsibility as a *mis*understanding nurtured by the soothing outlook for ideological extrication; that it can disentangle itself from ideology's hold on it by immersing itself deeper in it. By extensively seeing to this splitting of social responsibility from self-determination, freedom can only ever by represented as the liberating neutralization of demoralization. However, the subject does not stand to gain any freedom. Instead, it voluntarily liberates itself from the proper responsibility necessary for self-determination proper. Thus, what appears to be a liberation from individual demoralization is really the confirmative effects of a moralizing social repudiation. Or to be clear, self-determination does indeed imply that the possibility of freedom is de facto never truly dispensed with; however, with the potentiation of individualizing ideology, the very responsibility necessary for proper freedom becomes increasingly distant in the infinite texture of reproduction.

Restrictive participation does not in and of itself enact the initial tear that splits the conceptual unity of self-determination. Rather, this splitting constitutes a precondition already immanent with the common sense of everyday ideology, and only *then* can the psy-discourse appeal to it as a means of and subjective relief through discursive reproduction. More specifically, the psy-discourse does not directly hold individual subjects personally responsible for the restrictivity of their actions: instead, and much more troublesome, when the responsibility of the individual is represented through the psy-discourse it has *already* been narrowed down to imply only their own responsibility for themselves. For Zizek, this is the moralist kernel of psychology's hypocritical sentiment: at once, it asserts the proclivity for restrictive behavior to be a personal quality that reflects the integrity of a flawed individual whose social recognition is then transposed depending on its regurgitation of a self-antagonizing discourse. As if this would imply a means of "caring" for individual integrity. Here, Osterkamp rightly emphasizes that only with the concept of the unity of self-determination and social responsibility is it possible to recognize how it is torn apart; and only *then* can we "recognize the political function of narrowing responsibility down the individual [...] as one specific mode of demoralizing people by denying them the means to tackle the situation they face and blaming them personally if they fail to cope with this situation" (2009, p. 177).

In this modus, the psy-discourse is one distinct historical means of providing a distance to everyday ideology. The social reality of individualization can be *held together by attending to the* tear of the unity of self-determination. This tear, however, is conceptually approached from the other side in Zizekian psychoanalysis. With Osterkamp, the concept of agentive unity allows us to recognize that the performativity of tearing it apart is the social link that brings social reality into a whole. Whereas with Zizek, "the fundamental operation of the psychoanalytic treatment is not synthesis, bringing elements into a link, but, precisely, analysis, separating what in social link appears to belong together" (2006b, p. 110). Thus, social reality already a appears to constitute a concise image that is not

made up by fragmented pieces, but whose unity (and the obfuscation of its real composite quality) is sustained by the preservation of its social links and their relative composition.

Conclusions

If we approach freedom as expansive agency, then the imaginary unity of everyday ideology and the forms of knowledge that tend to its texture can only be overcome by a *positive critique* that dares to analyze the social links in which this texture *appear* as a whole. As such, we must inquire the very spontaneity of social reality itself in which everything was initially torn apart, and this disclosure itself can positively work as a means of subjective emancipation. As Nissen states, proper self-overcoming "may imply the 'little death' of a dissolution of specific forms of agency", meaning that the possibility of agency is also to be found even when participation seems most restricted. This also points to the existential implications of a critique of ideology, and that it may impose this 'little death': with the attempt to externalize and analyze everyday ideology and its composite social reality, this process will intentionally try to dissolve the immediate unity of its texture of appearance (2023, p. 119). The 'little death' thus implies, that certain forms of subjectivity might see a critique of ideology as a threatening of their integrity, but at the same time, such a process can only prevail through the involvement and emancipation of those very subjects and their experiences.

In an existentialist critique of anxiety, we must start, as was already formulated by Haug (1979), with the spontaneity in which anxiety is initially thought and through which it is already represented and portrayed, i.e., through the antagonistic attitude of the psy-discourse. However, we must also approach anxiety with a distinctly different mood, as Kierkegaard remarks: "The mood of psychology would be antipathetic curiosity, whereas the proper mood is earnestness expressed in courageous resistance. The mood of psychology is that of a discovering anxiety, and in its anxiety, psychology portrays sin, while again and again it is in anxiety over the portrayal that it itself brings forth" (1980, p. 15). To be sure, subjective anxiety is not to be analyzed *outside* the social link between subject and discourse: it is precisely their link and the self-portraying implications of anxiety that must be studied. With CBT, the approach to anxiety is centered around its restrictive objectification, where subjects are encouraged to find personal sense and use of standardized representations, models, languages, etc. The interpretative framework functions, at least to its own accord, as a natural means for the subject to relate to *its own* anxiety and putting it into an impersonal discourse. A certain subject is constituted with this "socialization": it shapes and transforms the self of a subject who comes to think and understand itself and its predicament through the "care" of antipathetic psy-imagery.

The form of critique implied with an existentialist critique of ideology, perhaps as a contribution to a post-psychology, must not only rearticulate the psy-discourse as scientific-expertise that has found a firm base within our everyday lives. As was shown with the globalizing interpretative repertoires of psy, this critique must also be willing to risk, perhaps even seek out, interrogating the personal bonds we form with a discourse, who seemingly provides the recognition we are longing for, and who we care about for this very reason. So far, my critique has only shown the preliminary implications of the psy-discourse and its interpretative reflexivization, but further studies could relevantly pursue how the psy-discourse is *put into practice*: for what purposes is it employed and

how does it guide and justify the actions of subjects in particular practices? Within the issues of what would is generally conceived as ill mental health, subjective well-being, or psychopathology, the underlying ideologies that precondition how we objectify them are often neglected and repressed by the very discourses we employ for their objectification. How the psy-disciplines approach and think about the problems they care about are deeply laden with meaning: it is precisely this repression of meaning implied with the neutral stance of scientific-expertise that needs to be disclosed. Not to simply disprove and oppose the certainty of their knowledge, but to reveal that there *is* meaning, and to study what it implies for subjects in practice.

Throughout my approach, the problem with anxiety is that ideology emerges twice: first, the emotionality of anxiety implies as a constrictive objectification where subjectivity is rendered powerless by the permeation of suppressive meaning. Then objectification reenters, subjective anxiety is externalized as an object to be interpreted and made sense of, and thus subjectivity is transformed (or at least extended) by the addition of anxiety to the texture of meaning. As pointed out by Nissen, this pendulum swing of subjectivity, i.e., between disintegration and reconstitution in the process of subject-object-subject, is most analogous to the ritualized bon mot of the proclamation of a coronation: "the subject is dead - long live the subject!" (2002, p. 81, author's translation). With both Nissen and Osterkamp, the concept of self-determination and its agentive unity is pivotal in overcoming the repression of the engendering of power that is foundational to the psy-discourse: "[w]ith the concept of self-determination, its constitutive repression is lifted, and what we might call the *crisis of the problematic* comes to the surface: The wound in psychology's attempt to objectify subjectivity without admitting to the power this implies is opened" (2020, p. 75). With the expressions of anxiety in everyday ideology, the psy-discourse is on the one side situated by *general* forms of ideology that afford its scientific-expertise to begin with the recognition of what has always-already been deemed problematic. On the other side, the psy-discourse can assist its foundational common sense by providing scientific means of stabilizing and concretizing anxiety as distinct irrational, intrusive, pathological issue to overcome.

References

Batmaz, S. (2014). The Conceptual Foundations of Metacognitive Therapy. *Journal of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Research* (3), pp. 11-17.

Breinholst, S., Christiansen, B. M., & Esbjørn, B. H. (2018). Kognitiv adfærdsterapi med børn [Cognitive behavioral therapy with children]. *Pædagogisk Psykologisk Tidsskrift, 55*(1).

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York. Routledge.

Butler, J. (1977a). *The Psychic Life of Power - Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press.

Butler, J. (1997b). *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative.* New York: Routledge.

Chapman, A. (2015). Wellbeing and Schools: Exploring the Normative Dimension. K. Wright & J. McLeod (Eds.), *Rethinking Youth Wellbeing*, pp. 143-159. Springer.

Copjec, J. (1994). *Read My Desire*. The MIT Press.

Danziger, K. (1997). *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found its Language*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Derrida, J. (1981). *Dissemination*. The University of Chicago Press.

Dreier, O. (2006). Imod abstraktionen af struktur [Against the abstraction of structure]. *Nordiske Udkast, 34*(1), pp. 3-12.

Dreier, O. (2007). Generality and particularity of knowledge. V. V. Deventer, M. T. Blanche, E. Fourie, & P. Segalo (Eds.), *Citizen City. Between Constructing Agent and Constructed Agency*, pp. 188-196. Concord, Ontario: Captus Press.

Ereaut, G., & Whiting, R. (2008). *What do we mean by 'wellbeing' and why might it matter?* London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Fiennes, S. (Director). (2012). *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* [Film]. Zeitgeist Film.

Foucault, M. (1994). *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Press.

Graham, J. L. (2015). To Be Well Is to Be Not Unwell: The New Battleground Inside Our Children's Heads. K. Wright & J. McLeod (Eds.), *Rethinking Youth Wellbeing*, pp. 11-33. Springer.

Haug, W. F. (1979). Individets borgerlige privatform og samfundets omverdensform [The bourgeois private form of the individual and the external form of society]. O. Dreier (Eds.), *Den Kritiske Psykologi*, p. 159-174. Rhodos: København.

Holzkamp-Osterkamp, U. (1979). Erkendelse, emotionalitet, handleevne [Cognition, emotion, agency]. O. Dreier (Eds.), *Den kritiske psykologi*. Rhodos: København.

Holzkamp, K. (1983). *Grundlegung der Psychologie* [Principles of psychology]. Frankfur am Main: Campus Verlag.

Holzkamp, K. (1991). Psychoanalysis and Marxist Psychology. C. W. Tolman & W. Maiers (Eds.), *Critical Psychology - Contributions to an historical science of the subject*, pp. 81-101. Cambridge University Press.

Holzkamp, K. (2005). Mennesket som subjekt for videnskabelig metodik [The human being as subject for scientific methodology]. *Nordiske Udkast, 33*(2), pp. 5-33.

James, A. C., Reardon, T., Soler, A., James, G., & Creswell, C. (2013). Cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety disorders in children and adolescents. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 6*.

Kierkegaard, S. (1941). *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1980). *The Concept of Anxiety*. Princeton University Press.

Kousholt, K. B, Krejsler, J. B., & Nissen, M. (2019). *At skulle ville* [To have to want to]. Samfundslitteratur.

Lacan, J. (1978). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Lacan, J. (2007). *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Lundkvinst-Houndoumadi, I., Thastum, M., & Hougaard, E. (2016). Effectiveness of an Individualized Case Formulation-Based CBT for Non-responding Youths with Anxiety Disorders. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 25*(2), pp. 503-517.

Madsen, P. L. (2021). *Når børn og unge får angst* (When Children and Adolescents get Anxiety]. Lindhardt og Ringhof.

Maiers, W. (1991). Critical Psychology: Historical Background and Task. C. W. Tolman & Maiers (Eds.), *Critical Psychology - Contributions to an historical science of the subject*. Cambridge University Press.

Nissen, M. (2002). Det kritiske subjekt [The Critical Subject]. *Psyke & Logos, 23*, pp. 65-86.

Nissen, M. (2004). Wild objectification: Social work as object. *Outlines, 6*, pp. 73-89.

Nissen, M. (2005). The subjectivity of participation - Sketch of a theory. *Subjectivity: International journal of critical psychology*, 15, pp. 151-179.

Nissen, M. (2009). Objectification and Prototype. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 6*(1), pp. 67-87.

Nissen, M. (2012). *The Subjectivity of Participation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Nissen, M. (2018). Who,'we'? The Constitution and the Singular Identity of the Collective. *Subjectivity, 11*(4), pp. 357-377.

Nissen, M. (2020). Critical Psychology: The most recent version (soon to be replaced), illustrated by the problem of motivation. *Psychologie und Kritik der Psychologisierung nach 1945*. L. Malich, V. Balz. Hamburg, Springer.

Nissen, M. (2023). *Rearticulating Motives*. Springer.

Osterkamp, U. (2009). Knowledge and Practice in Critical Psychology. *Theory & Psychology, 19*(2), pp. 167-191. https://doi-org.ez.statsbiblioteket.dk:12048/10-1177/0959354309103538

Osterkamp, U. (2016). "There is No Right Life in the Wrong One": Recognizing this Dilemma is the First Step Out of it. E. Schraube & C. Højholt (Eds.), *Psychology and the Conduct of Everyday Life*. Routledge.

Osterkamp, U. (2019). The contradiction between aspiration and reality in critical psychology. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology, 16*, pp. 556-571.

Rose, N. (1996). *Inventing our selves: Psychology, power and personhood*. Cambridge University Press.

Staunæs D. & Juelskjær, M. (2014). Postpsykologisk subjektiveringsteori [Postpsychological theory on subjection]. *Personlighedspsykologi: En grundbog om personlighed og subjektivitet.* Hans Reitzel.

Tolman, C. W. (1991). Critical Psychology: An Overview. C. W. Tolman & W. Maiers (Eds.), *Critical Psychology – Contributions to an historical science of the subject*. Cambridge University Press.

Thastum, M. (2018). Angstlidelser hos børn [Anxiety disorders in children]. *Pædagogisk Psykologisk Tidsskrift, 55*(1).

Tolman, C. W. (1994) *Psychology, Society, and Subjectivity*. Routledge.

Zizek, S. (1994). *Mapping Ideology*. Verso.

Zizek, S. (2005). Kierkegaard with Lacan. *Lacanian Ink 26: Anxiety*.

Zizek, S. (2006a). *How to Read Lacan*. Granta Books.

Zizek, S. (2006b). Objet a in Social Links. J. Clemens & R. Griggs (Eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, sic vi. Duke University Press Books.

Zizek, S. (2006c). *The Parallax View*. MIT Press.

Zizek, S. (2008a). *Violence*. Picador.

Zizek, S. (2008b). *In Defense of Lost Causes*. Verso.

Zizek, S. (2012b). *Slavoj Zizek: We Need Thinking*. Localized August 18th, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtPghWHAQfs

About the authors

Jeppe Pasgaard is an External Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Southern Denmark. His research draws on later developments of sociocultural psychology, psychoanalysis, existentialism and broader transdisciplinary approaches to anxiety, subjection, becoming, critique, ideology, everyday life, and the practicing of psychological knowledge.

jeppepasgaard@gmail.com