Editorial

Critical Theorizing in Practice: The transformative work of social inquiry

Eduardo Vianna[1], João Otavio Garcia[2]

[1]LaGuardia Community College and Graduate Center - CUNY, New York, USA
[2]Federal Institute of Santa Catarina, Jaraguá do Sul, Brazil

This volume assembles three articles, published sequentially in our continuous publication stream as they became ready, embodying our commitment to presenting critical research through a dialogue between diverse approaches. Together, they form a sketch full of living promises, with each contribution undertaking a critical inquiry at the intersection of individual subjects, social structures, and historically developed cultural forms in and of practice, aiming to intervene in public discourses on anxiety, intimacy, and speech. With works from Denmark, Ireland, and Mexico, this volume builds the dialogue among critical approaches that defines our scope, weaving together German-Scandinavian critical psychology, sociocultural developmental studies, and political philosophy to expand the critical-theoretical range of critical practice studies. The articles exemplify the journal's core principle: that theory and practice presuppose and move each other.

They demonstrate how a rigorous critique of existing conditions is the first step in their potential transformation, moving beyond analysis to establish counter-discourses in various social fields. They show that our most intimate experiences are structured by ideological, technological, and discursive systems, offering frameworks for a critical social practice that seeks not to manage individuals within these systems but to transform the very conditions of possibility for subjectivity.

Jeppe Pasgaard's opening essay, "A Critical Disquisition on the Ideology of Anxiety," excavates the foundational layer of this matrix: ideological mediation. With penetrating analysis, Pasgaard dissects how the therapeutic 'psy-discourse' transforms anxiety from a fundamental aspect of human agency—the anxious relation to one's own social possibilities—into a depoliticized, naturalized "survival mechanism." His critique is rigorously built upon the tradition of German-Nordic Critical Psychology, particularly the

works by Holzkamp and Osterkamp and later extended by Nissen. Pasgaard draws on their dual conception of subjectivity—encompassing both agency (the proactive, cooperative praxis of influencing life conditions) and reflexivity (the subject's capacity to relate to actions as options rather than necessities). Within this framework, anxiety is theorized as a key dimension of emotionality, marking the subject's expectation of a loss of its relative agency when confronted with restrictive conditions. Crucially, Pasgaard applies Nissen's insight that agency is socially generalized and externalized in material form as cultural objects, arguing that anxiety itself has become such an object within the ideological structures of the 'psy-discourse.'

He exposes how this commonsense consensus operates as a reflexive bracketing that establishes the immediacy of anxiety, precisely by mediating it through a "precarious but coherent network" of biological reductionism and vague concepts. This network forms a unified, globally applicable therapeutic discourse that posits its interpretations as the "right" logic beyond mere interpretation, thereby erasing its own implication in the subject's well-being. Pasgaard's critique ascends to the concrete in a sharp examination of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which he argues idealizes adaptation by targeting anxiety itself as the "real danger." Following Osterkamp, he cogently demonstrates how this logic assumes societal conditions are immutable, necessitating the treatment of emotions as the source of peril, and in doing so, tears apart the unity of self-determination and the transformation of life conditions. The result is a "counterfeit responsibility"—a private duty to self-regulate. By synthesizing this critical psychological foundation with psychoanalytic theory, Pasgaard reveals anxiety as an "ideological deadlock," appearing both behind and in front of the subject, and argues that the ideological practice of deploying anxiety concepts "reflects and transforms social reality." His work sets the stage by showing how the subject's interiority is pre-formatted by an ideology that individualizes social contradiction.

Melane Pilek and Constance de Saint-Laurent's study, "Digital Romance: Meaning-making in the Trajectories of Online Relationships," meticulously investigates the next layer: technological mediation. The article extends the literature on online dating by directly confronting a central contradiction: the persistent societal concern over technology's negative impact on intimacy versus the effective, increasing reliance on it to meet relational needs. To resolve this, the authors adopt a sophisticated sociocultural and developmental framework, rooted in Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology. They move beyond linear, stage-based models of relationship development to focus on unique biographical trajectories. Their analytical engine is an expanded semiotic prism, which situates the Person, the relational Other, and the mediating Tool (the dating technology) within the field of the Generalized Other—the collective cultural representations, norms, and societal voices that shape meaning.

Through in-depth interviews with thirteen young- to middle-aged adults in Ireland, the authors trace how the meaning of the technology, the partner, and the relationship itself evolves dynamically across different phases of a relationship's life course. A key finding is that the salience of the Generalized Other—such as stigmatizing or idealizing discourses about online dating—waxes and wanes, being most pronounced in early stages and often receding as a relationship becomes hybridized (blending online and offline interaction). The tool is not a static object but is continuously re-signified: a platform can shift from being a site of hopeful exploration to a practical communication channel to, potentially, a

source of relational tension. This analysis powerfully demonstrates that the "meaning-making" described is the subject's active, constrained negotiation within a pre-structured field. The digital interface does not merely channel desire but actively co-authors the script of connection, embedding social norms and commercial logics into the very fabric of how relationships are initiated, sustained, and understood.

Marcos Alegría Polo's concluding essay, "The Liar, the Joker, and the Killer," exposes the diffuse yet powerful layer of discursive and collective mediation. Polo, a Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Iztapalapa, and a member of Mexico's Sistema Nacional de Investigadores, anchors his analysis in a deceptively simple question: What is the problem with a tasteless joke? His theorizing develops through a critical engagement with philosophical and social scientific resources. He re-examines Immanuel Kant's absolutist position on lying—as articulated in On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy—to argue that a lie's primary function is not merely to deceive belief, but to "reset the terms of a given interaction" and set a social tone. This reframing, which draws on Hannah Arendt's insight that the liar actively tries to change the shared world rather than merely describe it, creates a wedge between a speaker's individual intent and the aggregate effects of their speech.

Challenging the intuitive link between harm and intent, he argues that a sexist or xenophobic remark need not arise from a malicious heart to produce a nefarious effect. The central puzzle he tackles is how speech acts—lies, jokes—can generate harmful aggregate outcomes that stray from, and even contradict, a speaker's individual intentions. Polo's analysis of disparagement humor is grounded in the empirical work of Thomas E. Ford, whose research demonstrates that such jokes expand "the bounds of appropriate conduct, creating a norm of tolerance of discrimination." Building on this, Polo's great contribution is to synthesize these strands by pointing toward collective agency, suggesting that as critical dimension for further inquiry. Namely, he demonstrates how "tasteless" joke and remarks enact a form of agency that is irreducible to individuals, generating the very "tone-setting effects that regulate the disposition of collective agency." Thus, the article opens a fascinating window not so much into "the fact that tasteless jokes can cause harm, but how is it that they are able to do so."

This volume, however, does more than present isolated studies. It constructs a lens through which to see the subject as a nexus of mediations. It challenges scholars and practitioners to simultaneously attend to the co-constitutive individual and collective layers that form the fabric of social practice. The critical task that emerges is to develop forms of analysis, therapy, and solidarity capable of interrogating and transforming the status quo. In an age of escalating loneliness, digital saturation, and polarized discourse, this collected work offers not just diagnosis, but a compass for emancipatory practice that seeks to reclaim agency precisely at this vital intersection.