

# Societal Psychology in Norway

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This special issue is comprised of a diverse collection of theoretical and empirical papers from Norway. The choice of *societal psychology* as a means of organizing these contributions will be discussed in this introduction. Although the term is infrequently used internationally, it has been adopted as the closest translation for the Norwegian disciplinary boundary *samfunnspsykologi*, which has structured each main contributor's experience of psychology as graduate or post-graduate researchers. I also hope to illustrate that Himmelweit's (1990) original conceptualization of societal psychology is also appropriate to unify these articles due to its openness toward multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives.

## **SAMFUNNSPSYKOLOGI IN NORWEGIAN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS**

The Norwegian label *samfunnspsykologi* currently possesses two dominant meanings. It connotes both a specific way to organize the academic discipline of psychology and a field to specialize in as a clinical psychologist<sup>1</sup>. Both usages generally attempt to connect the field of psychology to something beyond the individual. It is the former type of *samfunnspsykologi*, linked to research and higher education within the Norwegian psychological departments, to which most of the contributors here locate their research; it is thus the predominant focus of this special issue. Carlquist, Blakar, & Nafstad (2007) suggest that its closest translation is societal psychology while the more clinically oriented *samfunnspsykologi* shares similarities with community psychology. Although there are other possible translations for research-oriented *samfunnspsykologi*<sup>2</sup>, I have adopted societal psychology as the preferred term in the present issue. As illustrated below, it seems to most appropriately describe the diversity of perspectives that one finds or has found at Norwegian universities to identify research bodies, master's degrees, and professional academic titles. I shall provide a short description of these various forms below.

At the University of Bergen the *Institutt for samfunnspsykologi*<sup>3</sup> (ISP) hosts different research programs which focus on bullying, judgment and decision making, operational psychology, and diversity in society and the workplace, and employ multiple methodologies ranging from basic laboratory research to field studies. The *Kultur og samfunnspsykologi* research group at the University of Oslo is comprised of faculty members and post-graduate researchers who study topics such as gender issues, the manifestation of psychology in society, language change and ideology, representations of well-being, day care and the everyday life of small children, and multilingualism. Meanwhile, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim (NTNU), has traditionally hosted a "*Sosial og samfunnspsykologi*" conference, a duty it now shares with Lillehammer University College. Finally, at the bachelors, masters, and professional

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.psykol.no/Kurs-og-utdanning/Spesialistreglementet/Spesialiteten-i-klinisk-psykologi/Klinisk-samfunnspsykologi>

<sup>2</sup> For example, psychosocial science (<http://www.uib.no/psyfa/isp/english.html>) or applied social psychology ([http://uit.no/for-studiesokere/vis-emne?p\\_document\\_id=265791&ar=2012&semester=V](http://uit.no/for-studiesokere/vis-emne?p_document_id=265791&ar=2012&semester=V))

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uib.no/isp>

study levels, various courses have been and are offered in *samfunnspsykologi* at all four main universities in Bergen, Oslo, Trondheim, and Tromsø.

This special issue on Societal Psychology in Norway aims to provide an opportunity to showcase several of the resulting practices and products of *samfunnspsykologi* that have occurred within Norwegian academic institutions. The term *societal psychology* was most noticeably proposed by social psychologists who were increasingly dissatisfied with the experimental and individualistic direction of dominant forms of social psychology in the mid-1980s and early-1990's (Himmelweit & Gaskell, 1990; Lazlo & Wagner, 2003). Himmelweit (1990) argued that societal psychology should emphasize "the all-embracing force of the social, institutional, and cultural environments, and with it the study of social phenomena in their own right as they affect, and are affected by, the members of the particular society (Himmelweit, 1990; p. 17)." She put forward 15 propositions for societal psychology and advocated for the label's appeal to redefine social psychology in a direction that aimed to study social phenomena and individuals within their institutional, socio-cultural, and historical contexts. Many of these goals may be found manifested amongst the content of academic degrees and types of research framed within *samfunnspsykologi* at the aforementioned Norwegian institutions.

However, Himmelweit & Gaskell's (1990, p. 9) suggestions that societal psychology could be a unifying label for researchers interested in "the study of social phenomena, institutions, and culture and their relation to, and interaction with, members of society....and the way social life functions" has not really caught on. A search of "*societal psychology*" in databases such as PsychInfo or Google Scholar yields few results. One finds that it has been sporadically used by mostly European social psychologists and continues to act as a distancing device away from traditional social psychology (Doise, 2004; Lazlo & Wagner, 2003; Valentim, 2011). Moreover, this usage pales in comparison to other related disciplinary demarcations with relatively short histories which have become increasingly more popular following various crises within (social) psychology, such as *community, critical, cultural, discursive, psychosocial*, or even the more recent *sociocultural*<sup>4</sup> psychology.

The present contributions are organized around the term societal psychology, despite the lack of popularity of the term, for two reasons. The first pragmatic choice involves the translation of *samfunnspsykologi* as suggested by Carlquist et al. (2007) to represent the different types of psychological research which has been generated under this label. In other words, societal psychology seems to be the most all-encompassing representation that may provide a unifying framework for the diverse practices of *samfunnspsykologi*. The second concerns societal psychology's potential theoretical, conceptual and methodological openness toward approaching social phenomena and societal contexts (Laszlo & Wagner; 2003; Himmelweit, 1990). Subsequent research practices organized under the label tend to avoid reductionist or individualistic approaches, but at the same time may employ or at least not discount more traditional perspectives (e.g. laboratory work or survey research on specific social issues). This plurality and tolerance undoubtedly characterizes *samfunnspsykologi* at the four main Norwegian universities, which is accordingly mirrored in the contributions of this special issue.

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<sup>4</sup> Valsiner & Rosa (2007)

## THE PRESENT ISSUE

Four different articles representing Norwegian societal psychology are presented in this issue of *Psychology & Society*. They take on the diverse issues of dog ownership and well-being, the act of whistleblowing, psychologists' contribution to the depoliticisation of social issues, and global identity. Contributions are arranged alphabetically.

Andreassen, Stenvold, & Rudmin examine the health benefits of pet ownership in a Norwegian sample of dog owners. From a societal psychological perspective, Andreassen et al.'s work reminds us that in Western societies, having a pet is increasingly being viewed in terms of individual psychological happiness, quality of life, and general health. Moreover, they discuss how their findings may be applied to enhance the benefits of dog ownership in different areas of social life. As Stenseng's commentary points out, their contribution also runs parallel to a recent wave of Norwegian studies initiated by young researchers focusing upon well-being and positive psychology.

Bjørkelo & Madsen's study of the relationship between the act of whistleblowing and neoliberal ideology is perhaps more prototypical of Himmelweit's (1990) original conception of societal psychology. The authors and Allen's commentary articulate a number of dilemmas concerning how we should understand the act of whistleblowing considering the domination of neoliberal thought in working life. By highlighting the tensions between potentially conflicting economic, moral, and ethical concerns and individual responsibility to report wrongdoing in the workplace, the authors provide a number of thought-provoking issues that need further investigation.

Madsen's article addresses psychologists' underlying assumptions of neutrality combined with their increasing influence in the Norwegian public sphere. He illustrates how Norwegian psychologists may contribute to the depoliticisation of societal issues when they communicate and produce scientific knowledge as experts in his exploration of three cases on fatherhood and caregiving, infidelity, and child development. Rand-Hendriksen's commentary builds upon the concept of depoliticisation and focuses more explicitly on the complex relationships between politicians, the media and expert groups.

Türken and Rudmin's contribution presents a thorough literature review and description of four studies involved in the development of a psychometric scale to assess global identity. Their conception of global identity is considered in relationship to nationalism, cosmopolitanism and current globalization processes. Moreover, their work is complementary to recent studies that engage in psychometric scale development and issues of identity and ideology in the Norwegian multicultural context (e.g. Kunst, Tajamal, Sam, & Ulleberg, 2012; Phelps, Eilertsen, Türken, & Ommundsen, 2011). Sheehy-Skeffington's commentary highlights the challenges that Türken and Rudmin had to negotiate by focusing upon the dilemmas involved in developing psychometric measures that attempt to both address theoretical and conceptual complexity on the one hand, and meet rigorous empirical standards on the other.

It should also be noted that the use of psychometric measures in general have been criticized by those associated with *Psychology & Society* (e.g. Sammut, 2013; Wagoner & Valsiner, 2005). Other similar studies in Norway and contributions by Türken and Rudmin and Andreassen et al. tend to advocate a critical but pragmatic approach (see

also Phelps, 2012; Rudmin, 2008; Sheehy-Skeffington, present issue). While justifiably criticized, the 'open' societal psychological position taken in this special issue suggests that as long as the application of these measures are anchored in particular socio-historical and cultural contexts, and ideally combined with other methods, they are still considered as useful tools to grasp aspects of the individual/society interface (see also Sammut, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, the present issue consists of four articles and commentaries on societal psychology in Norway. Each main contributor has had his or her experience of psychology structured by the disciplinary distinction *samfunnspsykologi* in different ways. While the institutional, conceptual, and methodological diversity that make up these *samfunnspsykologi* experiences do not necessarily point to a unified approach, this special issue aims to contribute to a process of reflection on its usage in organizing the main academic institutions that produce psychological research and educate students in Norway. Moreover, readers shall find that the 'products' of *samfunnspsykologi* in this special issue make thought-provoking theoretical and empirical developments to the general study of psychology and society.

On a final note, I would like to thank Henry Allen, Akiah Berg, Ines Blix, Erik Carlquist, Natalia Concha, Marco Gianni, Kristoffer Guttsønn, Mona-Iren Hauge, Sarah Kamens, Seamus Power, Kim Rand-Hendriksen, Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington, Frode Stenseng, Salman Türken, and Brady Wagoner for their contributions toward the editing and reviewing process involved in this special issue.

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