

Neurosis in Culture and Psychiatry in Socialist Poland, 1956-1989

Popular Summary

The aim of the project is to analyze expert and journalistic discourses and literary representations of neurosis in Poland between 1956 and 1989. A look at such diverse material as psychiatric texts, newspaper articles, and novels will allow me to uncover the cultural and political meanings attached to neurosis. The example of neurosis will demonstrate how in socialist Poland the notion of mental illness and mental health-which neurosis was the opposite of-was constructed, and above all such notions as subjectivity, normality and pathology.

Neurosis, next to schizophrenia, was the most frequently commented on and described mental illness in both the expert and popular press: the topic of neurosis appeared both in political and social magazines, and in magazines aimed at specific social groups: women, students, teenagers. Neurosis was said to affect adults and children, and many texts focused on ways to treat and prevent neurosis. Nevertheless, psychiatrists did not agree on a single definition of neurosis, and therefore on ways to treat it. Because of this multiplicity of definitions, treatment approaches and representations, neurosis provides a starting point for investigating the evolving psychiatric paradigms and ideas about mental health in socialist Poland. In addition, an analysis of discourses on neurosis will uncover the relationship between state ideology and psychiatry. To what extent has psychiatry-which deals with topics such as understanding subjectivity, the individual and her relationship to society, the collective and the family-been an autonomous field of medicine, and to what extent has it been shaped by state guidelines? Accordingly, neurosis constitutes both topic for the project and a lens through which to view the development, circulation and negotiation of expert and popular ideas about mental health, mental illness and psychiatry's relationship to state ideology.

In the project, I think about neurosis intersectionally, that is, in relation to categories such as gender, class and age. My thesis is that the understanding of neurosis presented by psychiatrists, experts and writers was not independent of their understanding of gender, class and age.

Main research questions:

- what ideas about neurosis were held by experts, writers and journalists in socialist Poland?
- how were concepts such as mental health, subjectivity, normality, pathology and human psychology understood in the context of neurosis?
- what were the relationships between state ideology and ideas about neurosis, mental health and mental illness?
- to what extent did Polish expert discourses on neurosis converge with international-socialist and Western-discourses on neurosis?

The main results of the grant will be a book manuscript written in Polish and three academic articles in English.