

The Epistemology Assumption of Critical Theory for Social Science Research

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Abstract

The main objective of critical theory is the focus upon the inherent connection between politics, values and knowledge in order to uphold that politics and values form the foundations leading towards scientific knowledge. Habermas' consensus theory of truth is considered here as the most important contribution toward the whole paradigm of critical theory. Critical theory critique towards the Objectivist's, stands for politically neutral observation language and states that social cultural factors influence our sensory experience and human cognition shapes reality through its imposition of a priori cognitive principles. Only the knowledge derived by discourse through the ideal speech situation is warranted knowledge. A criticism of critical theory is the lack of a clear methodological problem in the concept of oppression and its ideal speech situation. Despite numerous criticisms, critical theory provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom.

Key words: Critical Theory, Social redesrch, Habermas

Introduction

Critical theory is founded upon a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society. Critical theory focuses upon the inherent connection between politics, values and knowledge to instigate a deeper consideration what constitutes legitimate scientific knowledge (Alvesson and Willmott, 1998). Despite some similarity with postmodernism, critical theorists criticize postmodernists for the failure to provide a language to enunciate the necessary concerns with autonomy, individualism in its emphasis on desire and pleasure and, irrationalism in its objections to theory and critique (Best and Kellner, 1991). Critical theory's works orientate towards investigating issues such as exploitation, asymmetrical power relations, distorted communication, and false consciousness. Critical theory originated from Frankfurt School by theorists Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse where their works, initially, from within the Marxist framework, but subsequently, it drifted away from Marxism despite maintaining its opposition to the destructive effects of Capitalism. The aim of critical theory is to diagnose the problems of modern society and to identify the nature of the social changes necessary to produce a just and democratic society (Layder, 1994). These theorists works also offered a critique towards Cartesian-based epistemologies, Objectivism's stand for politically neutral observation and Enlightenment beliefs crucial for knowledge and freedom. Among the theorists of critical theory, Habermas is the most reputed for his contribution of the restructure of the whole paradigm of critical theory (Pusey, 1987).

Habermas

Habermas argued that our social cultural factors influence our sensory experience, as human cognition shapes reality through its imposition of a priori cognitive principles. For this, positivism's correspondence theory of truth along with the possibility of a theory of neutral observational language is impossible. In fact there is a relationship between 'knowledge' and 'interest', as human knowledge of external reality is through our imposition of object-constituting epistemological 'categories' which derive from our fundamental 'interests' (Habermas, 1974a). According to Habermas, there are two forms of knowledge derived from specific human interests during human evolution. First is empirical analysis as science, where human interest is derived through creative interplay with, and attempts at, exerting control over the natural environment. The need for physical survival leads to the development of knowledge about and over the external environment (Habermas, 1972). Second is historical hermeneutic science, this interest arises out of the need for inter-personal communication to establish understanding between the individual and a group. This is to facilitate the capture of the meanings of actions and communications. Once communication fails, the condition for human survival is disturbed (Habermas, 1972). Only for these interests does the external reality become objectified and then be accessible to experience. An additional third interest is in the form of an emancipatory interest where self-knowledge and understanding generated through self-reflection can free people from domination, i.e. systematic distortion of interaction and communication created through exercises of power.

This would enable knowledge previously considered unconscious to become conscious.

Figure 1: Summary of the three knowledge-constitutive interests

Type of science	Cognitive interest	Social domain	Purpose
Natural science (empirical–analytical)	Technical	Work	Prediction control
Cultural science (hermeneutics)	Practical	Language/culture	Understanding/ consensus
Critical science	Emancipatory	Power/authority	Enlightenment

Source: Mingers, 1992

To avoid relativism in Habermas' critical theory, Habermas argued that rational consensus derives from argument and analysis without resort to force, coercion, distortion or duplicity, and will entail "validity claims" which constitute a valid knowledge, he calls this the consensus theory of truth as the notion of truth relies upon consensus and this consensus should be free from unnecessary domination in all its forms (McCarthy, 1978). Critical theory, as advocated by Habermas, seeks to show the practical, moral and political significance of particular communicative actions. It also investigates how a particular social structure may produce and reinforce distorted communicative actions that in practices, subtly shapes the life of a member of the stated social structure.

Critical theory and management research

The aim of critical theory for management studies is to understand how the practices and institutions of management are developed and legitimized within the relationships of power and domination. It is to address and eliminate many aspects of organizational life such as inequality, domination and politics (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996), so that the inherent management system can be transformed to enable emancipation. For critical theory, a researcher is not a neutral observer rather and is very clear about their own values and objectives of undertaking the research. As per Parker (1995), because truth is seen as a temporary consensus, values become of central importance when adopting a critical perspective. According to Prasad and Caproni (1997), critical theory should emphasize the social construction of reality; focus on issues of power and ideology; understand any social or organizational phenomenon; and recognize the importance of praxis (the ongoing construction of social arrangements that are conducive to the flourishing of the human condition).

There are two approaches to develop a critical theory (Alvesson and Deetz, 1996). First is an ideology critique derived from Marxist principles and often focused on the exploitation of workers by managers (Braverman, 1974; Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980; Salaman, 1981). The main focus of a traditional ideology critique approach towards critical theory is based upon four processes: naturalization, the universalization of management interests, the primacy of instrumental reasoning and the notion of hegemony. Second is ideal speaking situation (by Habermas) where individuals might attempt to reform institutions through an ethically driven discourse which is arrived at in an ideal speech situation. The communication pattern is examined in the hope of removing systematic communicative distortions of misrepresentation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a) to form an accurate, honest and legitimate communication that provides the basis for rational, reflective and moral decision-making (Lawrence and Philips, 1998). Only by this, can consensus can be achieved and the validity claims made in such discussion can be assessed on the basis of criteria of comprehensibility, sincerity, truthfulness and legitimacy (Habermas, 1971).

Conceptualizations of management

Management research tends to assume that the political aspect of an organization is neutral with management goals that represent everyone within the organization. Critical theory is against these assumptions and argues that management is not neutral. Most often than not, management fails to appreciate the employee's needs and seeks to constrain human potential in order to reinforce the status quo (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Among the failure issues that are not addressed by traditional management theory are:

- 1) **Management as distorted communication.** This is where debate is focused on the means of achieving goals rather than upon what those goals should be. Rather than be open for discussions that would encourage different views, modern corporations tend to require and preserve communications that are systematically distorted.
- 2) **Management as mystification.** This is where managers plan to shape the manner that people make sense of the world by constructing a favourable image or through the careful arrangement of symbols and ceremonies.

- 3) **Management as cultural doping.** Here organizations try to influence worker's attitudes, values and expectations (Willmott, 1993; Legge, 1995) through certain program such as TQM or HRM.
- 4) **Management as colonizing power.** This is where a particular set of practices and understandings come to dominate in order for managers to extend their control over behavior and values. (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996)

Often these management styles are undiscussed during organization research and hence researchers should not view management as a neutral force. Even for managers themselves, researchers should not view them as homogeneous group. They differ in a number of dimensions (LaNuez and Jermier, 1992) and should not be viewed equally and some managers may themselves feel oppressed. Horkheimer (1989) identified white collar employees, including middle managers, as the social group that merits the most urgent critical examination. Middle managers often experience moral and ethical dilemmas and could easily be perceived as victims (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a; 1996; Jackall, 1988). From this, management should be seen as a social and political phenomenon rather than as a technical function that disregards the human needs factors that impacts the research methodology undertaken in this type of research and also the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Research methodology

Critical theory has a diverse range of methodologies. The core of critical methodology is the analysis of the current situation which enables us to understand how this has developed and liberates us from seeing this as the natural order of things. Morrow and Brown (1994) have identified several central principles for critical methodology which are:

- 1) social relations and social analysis always have an interpretative (hermeneutic) dimension;
- 2) meaning and language (forms of reality construction) both reveal and conceal the experiences of subjects;
- 3) structures may be species-specific or historically constituted and sometimes consciously transformed
- 4) that social and cultural structures variables cannot be determined by probabilistic analysis; and
- 5) that meaning and structures constantly change across space and time.

Therefore, the researcher needs to consider the phenomenological effects such as being sensitive to the understandings and interpretations of those being researched and the relationships and structures in the sense that consideration is given to the economic, political and social contexts in which the described actions have taken place.

There are three famous approaches to critical methodologies:

Critical ethnography

Critical ethnography seeks to expose the oppressive practices in organizations. Critical ethnographers are clear about their emancipatory values and much of what is taken to be critical ethnography is not praxis-oriented. This ethnography is appealing as it let people in organizations speak for themselves which is a vital means of moderating totalizing accounts of management and organization (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b). The researcher needs to be careful as people's discourse is complex and ambiguous and may not represent the actual situation; also the researcher needs to be aware the historical context in which research takes place and to reflect this critically on to the research process itself (Harvey and Myers, 1995). The critical ethnographer needs to explain the context of the meanings that local actors assign to situations and also divulge the socio-economic conditions that produce and reinforce asymmetrical structures of control. Therefore, the challenge for researcher is go beyond the informants world without relying exclusively on either pre-existing theory or mere speculation' (Jermier, 1998: 241).

The Habermasian approach

Habermasian approach essentially uses a theory of communicative and consensus theory of truth. Broadbent and Laughlin (1997) conducted a three stage process by using a Habermasian methodology approach for the researcher and those researched. First, the prime focuses are the researchers themselves with the aim of utilizing qualitative research methods to generate insights. These insights are then subjected to debate under the 'ideal speech situation' so as to come to some agreement by allowing the force of the better argument to prevail (Broadbent and Laughlin, 1997). Second, the discourse between the researchers and the researched becomes enlightened concerning each other's perceptions of the researched situation. Third, led by the researched, the focus will be on the selection of strategies for interventions that they feel are appropriate for the situation researched. However, the constraints of this approach are the issues of the 'ideal speech situation' where achieving consensus regarding the core issues of the research not influenced by the respective powers and interests of the researchers and researched is very difficult.

Habermas does not offer any information regarding how contradictory perceptions are to be dealt. John Forrester (1993) explains that in order for critical theory to be successful, critical methodology must encompass; 1) empirically sound and descriptively meaningful; 2) interpretively plausible and phenomenologically meaningful; and 3) critically pitched and ethically insightful.

Participation and critical theory

Critical theory under a constructivist stance emphasizes the importance given to processes of self-reflection and emancipation. These processes encourage co-operation and permission to investigate employees circumstances in such a way that would simultaneously gather information and raise consciousness so that the employees could better defend their interests (Sayer, 1992). Reason (1998) discusses three approaches towards participative research which are - co-operative inquiry, participatory action research and action inquiry. Common to these three approaches is that the data is generated in such a way that makes the participants feel causally responsible for the data collected. This will minimize the researcher's influences concerning what problems being studied, what data are being selected and the means by which they are selected. In addition, each method is designed to obtain data on how individuals actually act and on what they are thinking or feeling at the time of data collection. The main reason for these three approaches is make the researched have an active role in the research process rather than being passive subjects.

The roles of the researcher and the researched in critical research are highly interactive as critical research addresses the fundamental issues of these roles. The first role relates to the values of the researcher and how these impinge on the research process and findings. The researcher is to be conscious of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presuppositions that inform sense-making. A critical text is judged based on its ability reflexively to reveal hidden structures of oppression from the researched. The second relates to the consensus theory of truth where the researcher judges the veracity of truth claims with emphasis on socio-rational decision making processes and the development of knowledge through debates created in an 'ideal speech situation.' Debate is regarded as most rational when validity claims are examined and critiqued by the self-reflective participants.

Emancipatory values

Critical theory also acknowledges that value-free knowledge is questionable, as knowledge remains a product of particular values that give it meaning and direction (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). The way a human analyses and interprets empirical data are conditioned by the way they are theoretically framed and the ideological assumptions taken in the research. Critical theory tries to become aware of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presuppositions that inform decision making (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998). The necessary quality of this type of research from a critical theory standpoint, is its ability to reveal hidden structures of oppression as they operate and impact upon individual's experiences (Putnam et al, 1993).

Judging the veracity of truth-claims

According to critical theory, warranted knowledge is created through the discourses in an 'ideal speech' situation. As per Broadbent and Laughlin (1997), research design should attempt to generate conditions under which genuine discourse, unpolluted by issues of power, could develop between researchers and the researched in order to have validity claims of warranted knowledge. This free debate can generate a picture of reality, that enables researchers to avoid the relativism inherent in postmodernism.

Problematic issues

One of the main issues of critical theory is its inability to have a clear methodological explanation on the interpretive process (Yin, 1994, Denzin, 1998, Wong 2003, 2004). Critical theory seems to be a suggestion that researchers are either in favour of emancipation or against it (Morrow and Brown, 1994). There is also some problems in the area of concepts of oppression where the oppressor/oppressed model reflect the complexities of organizational life. Can a manager be both oppressor and oppressed? Critical theory gives information about how it would be rational for agents to act if they had certain interests (Geuss, 1982). Critical theory has also been criticized for its intellectualism. As argued by Fay (1987), is the sequence of suffering – critical investigation – reflection - emancipation without any problem as suggested by Habermas? In fact the power of reason is inherently limited by our experiences and our understandings of the present (Fay, 1987). The ability to attend 'ideal speech situations' in the Habermasian approach also underwent a series of criticisms since society still remains confined within the boundaries of domination. In addition, Habermas' notion of rational consensus to avoid relativism seems to be contradictory.

Conclusions

Based on the epistemological stance of critical theory, there are some similarities with conventionalism and postmodernism as shown below.

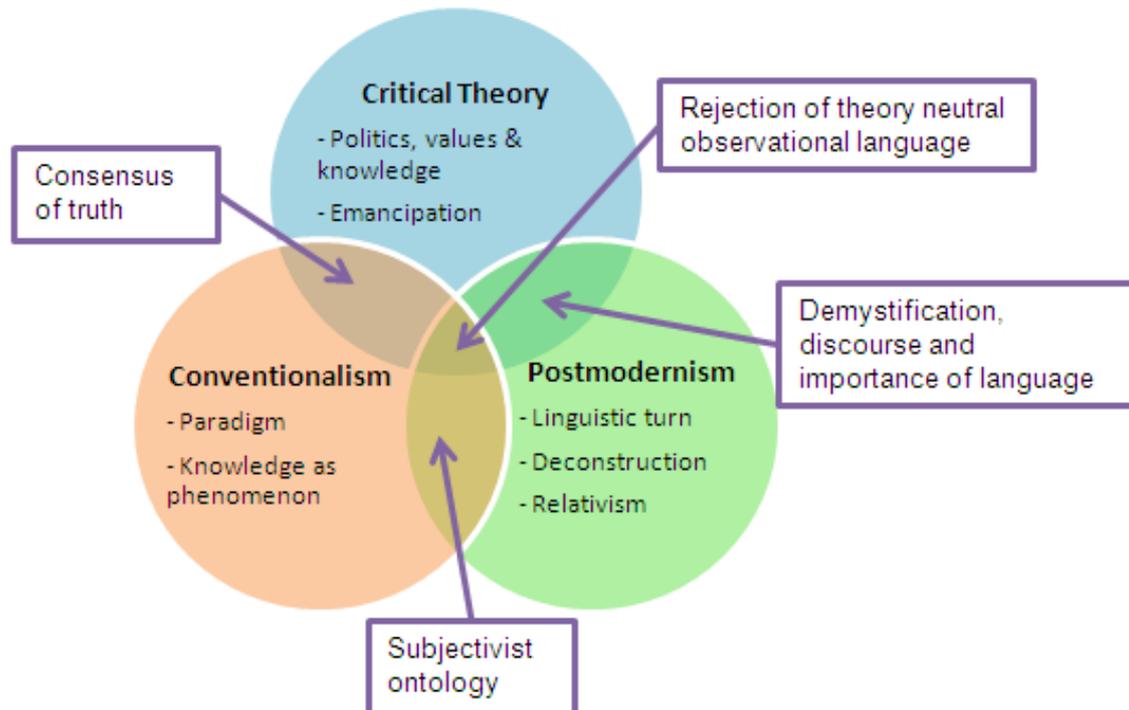


Figure 2: Similarity between Conventionalism, Postmodernism and Critical Theory. Source: Adapted from Horkheimer 1982

The key issue in critical theory is the 'ideal speech situation' that has reflexive awareness best achieved in open, undistorted communication, as it seeks to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them (Horkheimer 1982, Wong, 2003,2004). Critical theorists reject the current institutions as a result of their historical context influences and that communication within these institutions is systematically distorted, and only when the distortions of communication are removed, then we are able to assess the validity of particular claims to truth in open and honest debate. Despite some problematic issues associated with critical theory, it is an interesting approach towards management research as it provides a framework through which it is possible to examine the political nature of management and organizations and it also provides a standpoint from which to critique these processes and institutions. The rejection of relativism and attachment by critical theory to the goal of emancipation provides a distinctive ethical position and writers have produced a good deal of instructive work in the area of management.

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