

INSIGHTS FROM CRITICAL THEORY IN APPLIED RESEARCH

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## I INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a program of research with the following objectives:

- (1) To delineate the significance of social (organizational) context in the creation of statistical products in applied social research.<sup>1</sup>
- (2) To develop a theory suitable for approaching constructive resolution of key problems which social context may create for method.

These objectives include both understanding and improvement of method in applied social research.<sup>2</sup>

The paper begins with a review of the concerns and concepts of critical theory. It then calls attention to the fruition of the kinds of work called for by critical theory which, perhaps not so paradoxically, is taking place in the applied research community largely outside core circles concerned with theoretical study. The source of this constructive work is in those circles engaged in the experience or actual practice of applied social science to meet practical needs (cf: Dunn, 1982). This paper is primarily oriented toward the improvement of method.

## II CRITICAL THEORY

The critical theory tradition has diffused far beyond the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, its students, and even beyond the broader circles concerned with critique of the "Frankfurt School" and the profession and investigation of the varied theories of society (cf: Tar 1984). It is not the intent of this paper to address the original construction of critical theory, the intellectual phases of critical theory, or the debate concerning the assessment of the approach at a general societal level. The approach taken is to explore central insights and concepts of the school in relation to their practical and theoretical relevance for method in applied social research. The theoretical perspective adopted is that of the "weak" theory of the social study of science and the search for an "emancipatory epistemic strategy" for research (Restivo 1983a, 1983b).

As summarized by Tar (1984), the "legacy" of critical theory includes (1) humanist concern and in particular "sensitivity to the real problems of the age," (2) the domination of nature and the revenge of nature, (3) legitimation crises and the problem of

authority, (4) interdisciplinary research, and (5) the study of aesthetics. Empirically, the domain of inquiry in which there is the highest degree of organized social knowledge producing activity centrally involved with these concerns and in which such concerns are being most intensively studied (although largely without the guidance of formal theory) is the area variously identified as policy research, evaluation research, and applied social research. Critical theory may be viewed as a distillation of the substance of concerns encountered in the daily life of policy, evaluation, and applied social research "written big," that is, written to encompass the scope of human history and potential as the matter of a project or program.<sup>3</sup>

The work of the Frankfurt School spans several decades. One key area of inquiry was the attempt to understand the ways in which the Enlightenment brought about not only increased mastery of nature, but also new institutions of domination to humankind both in such manifestations as Nazism and in the increased administration of the individual sphere in progress toward a highly integrated and administered planet. Human freedom is a central concern of critical theory. Yet while freedom is dependent on knowledge gained by the progressive rationalization of life activity, freedom is also repressed as a product of the same progressive rationalization (Horkheimer & Adorno 1982). At the same time, critical theory insists on human freedom as a social criterion of truth (McCarthy 1975). This is the key relation of critical theory to applied social research.

The precondition for production of humane knowledge is the "free speech community". Critical theory is thus normative in that it incorporates a value commitment for "...the good and true life" and this is the basis on which it would orient the production of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that critical theory is a "process theory" which correctly emphasizes the social nature of knowledge production. The interest in producing knowledge roots scientific work in the context of "life structures". Research does not exist in some pure or ideal realm, but is a human activity, a practice of human and personal development at the same time as it is a process of knowledge production. These dimensions of research are "world-constitution" and "self-formation". World constitution is knowledge production as the "self-formative process" of the human species. This understanding implies the necessity of critical assessment of the orientation of all lines of research with regard to the kind of world being created by the research effort. Research projects are understood as socially situated particulars in relation to both a personal process of self-formation on the part of individual researchers and a collective human process of life activity which gives content to the life conditions and potential of humankind as a whole.

This orientation gives rise to several specific concerns. These include the various problems of interest, the potential for reduction of people through loss of informational autonomy (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1961), objectification and manipulation of "subjects", loss of human dimension or quality of life associated with the growing rational administration of all phases of social life (Horkheimer & Adorno 1982; Marcuse 1964), and the problem of weakening of democracy through administrative measures. Each of these concerns also has a form which arises in policy research.

Perhaps the clearest statement of these theoretical concerns to date arises from work at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Conditions of Life in the Scientific-Technical World, an intellectual and research center in the tradition of the original Institute for Social Research. Restivo (1985) in a review of the newly translated Finalization in Science (Schafer 1983) describes the current formulation of critical theory in the "finalist" program as follows:

The finalists view science as a "collective utility." Their program is rooted in the development of ecology as a "normalized natural science" in which objectivity (scientific theory-formation) and values (the pursuit of social and political goals) are consciously and intentionally integrated. Nature (in broadest terms, the ecosphere) is viewed as a subject rather than a productive, juridical, or economic object.

...their effort to give "task communities" the responsibility for pursuing science and technology in the public interest is designed to avoid "the academization of oriented research." ...The reconstruction of science is aimed at turning it away from Faustian quests that threaten to destroy the natural environment in the proces of pursuing knowledge of nature "for its own sake."

What is indicated in this program on a theoretical level is the lifeblood and daily experience of applied social research, with the exception that we do not often refer the particulars of our socially and organizationally situated research situations to such global and consistent theorizing. Yet all of these concerns arise in everyday evaluation research and policy research practice, and are usually dealt with consciously. We have no question that applied social research is inherently normalized -- that the domains of "ethics" and "method" inherently interpenetrate, that decisions of "science" and technique anticipate political consequences and are themselves referenced within socioeconomic and sociopolitical context of research practice in policy settings. There is also no question about the

problem of "academicized" research or the fruitfulness of multiple perspectives in the "task group" (or interdisciplinary) approach characteristic of applied social research (cf: Keating, et. al 1985).

### Qualifications

Six qualifications must be noted before proceeding on to discussion of applied research:

(1) The presentation of key concepts of critical theory in this paper is very brief. The implication of concepts such as human interests, relations of freedom/domination, freedom as a social criterion of truth (the free speech community ideal), and the formation of self and the social world through research as life activity) is that science practice is inherently embedded in philosophy of history. Yet it must be acknowledged that it is impossible in a paper to do more than call attention to the point. Also, it must be acknowledged that critical theory is much more complex than its presentation here might suggest, being both a theory and a meta-theory.

(2) Freedom as a criterion of truth is not a magical or always workable process, but a long run best bet. In any specific situation a dominated (unfree) research center might produce quicker or "better" results. There is also no guarantee that work informed by a "free speech" orientation won't go "wrong", even though it proceeds by "true consensus" approximating the process model of the free speech community.

(3) Similarly, critical theory provides a theoretical grounding for humanism. Yet there is no guarantee that its processes and products will be human (again, it is a question of the long term best bet).

(4) Critical theory leads to an understanding of science as human activity and of science as only one means of knowledge production among many, developing in alternative directions depending upon interests and evaluations from within and outside science, and penetrated at its core by the range of human motivations, perceptions, and expectations associated with its situated and historical social context. Thus it leads to open acknowledgement and inspection of the problem of pseudo-science (cf: MacKenzie 1981:1-4). There is no certainty of resolution of this problem, of clear separation of "science" and "pseudo-science" even with the aid of critical theory. Yet again, freedom as a social criterion of truth is a long term best bet.

(5) There is controversy regarding the use of the free speech community as employed in this paper. Habermas's own use of the "ideal speech situation" is primarily a linguistic analysis of communicative activity designed to establish the preconditions for "true consensus" in

his theory of communicative competence and in relation to the consensus theory of truth. Yet from the point of view of those actively involved in applied social research it only makes sense to use the concept as a goal and work towards it in negotiating research projects in their social environments.<sup>5</sup>

(6) The "finalist" formulation is most useful in calling attention to problems and "sensitizing" researchers to the global dimensions of what they face in everyday social negotiations in applied research. There are, however, definite problems in what the theorists have done at the theoretical level (Restivo 1985), and the solutions which actually satisfy the concerns of critical theory are much more likely to arise from the varied contexts and concrete experiences of applied research practice.

### III APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH

The kinds of concerns raised by critical theory are being addressed in the context of work processes in the area variously referred to as applied social research, evaluation research, or policy research. The addressing of such concerns is virtually inescapable.<sup>6</sup>

A dialectical approach to the design of applied social research experiments has been formulated by Dunn (1982) whose work is a methodological extension of Campbell's classic work in quasiexperimental design (Campbell & Stanley 1966). Campbell, in the context of the Great Society advocated careful research design, the testing of program variants, and what may be termed a "free speech" and resource rich environment with provision for advocacy of counter analysis by a "loyal opposition". Campbell also called for employment of "multiple measures of independent imperfection" and assessment both of multiple potential benefits and multiple potential negative consequences of projects.

Dunn's extension stems from a critique of the core methodology of quantitative social experiments. In Dunn's view:

(1) Campbell's metaphor of the "experimenting society" is insufficient because "nature" does not cleanly edit social research. Instead, results are "symbolically mediated" by the diverse standards, interests, definitions, and commitments of policy makers, researchers, other "stakeholders", and their organizations.

(2) Projects (reforms) are arguments.

(3) Jurisprudence is a better organizing metaphor for what happens in applied social research than is the imagery of "the experiment".

(4) Using this metaphor, tests of knowledge claims may continue to be phrased as "threats to usable knowledge,"

as they are in Campbell's work which has become the standard for quasi-experimental design.

(5) But the metaphor of jurisprudence broadens the concept of "threats to usable knowledge" and results in a "critical social science of knowledge applications..."

Campbell's more recent work takes these concerns much farther (1984a, 1984b).

In summary, this paper is an attempt to relate insights of critical theory to applied research. Critical theory offers a consistent theory for orienting life activity in applied research in a global view which is in accord with experience in applied social research "written large". The emphasis on free speech as an ideal provides a goal to be approximated in applied research contexts, and the theory provides a realistic motivation for "non-Faustian" research with the goal of truth.

NOTES

1 Primary sources in the social study of statistics include Kitsuse & Cicourel (1963); Garfinkel (1967); Cowan (1972); MacKenzie (1978, 1979, 1981); Hindness (1973), Irvine, Miles, & Evans (1979); Mitroff & Mason (1981); Mitroff, Mason & Barabba (1983) and Morgenstern (1963).

2 Work in this program to date includes Keating, Love, Oliver, Peach, & Flynn (1985), Peach, Oliver & Goldstein (1984), and Peach (1982, 1983, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c). The current paper draws, in part, on these sources and in particular on Peach (1984b). I would like to acknowledge a continuing dialog with Sal Restivo (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), Wolf Heydebrand and Dennis Wrong (New York University), and occasional discussion with Ron Westrum (Western Michigan University) and Don Campbell (Lehigh University) which has provided a context of interaction and criticism in which the current paper has been shaped.

3 Critical theory did not, of course, arise as such a distillation from incipient fields which were just coming into being. However, it now could arise from such fields of knowledge producing activity if it had not already. It is, in fact, re-developing in loose and sporadic coupling with the original theoretical tradition.

4 Quotation from a lecture by Jurgen Habermas, cited by Thomas R. McCarthy (1975:xv).

5 On this use, see Thomas McCarthy, "Translators Introduction," P. xvii in Habermas (1975).

6 It is not claimed that such "addressing" is either as elegant or theoretically consistent as critical theory, only that it is inherent in the social relations in which research is negotiated that such concerns are part of the activity of applied projects.

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