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ACTION RESEARCH AND CRITICAL THEORETIC APPROACHES TO MANAGEMENT STUDIES

This paper analyses the critical theory approaches to management studies. Critical theory provides a powerful critique of positivism as it rejects the suggestion of a theory-neutral observational language. Critical theory believes that researchers are able to influence their research results basing upon their accumulated experiences. Habermas, one of the emblematic philosophers of critical theory, emphasized that the ideal speech situation is vital to find truth in an open and honest debate. Emancipatory values matter, however, the ways in which we analyze and interpret empirical data are contaminated by the researcher's socio-cultural factors and sensory experiences. Critical theory is a valuable and interesting approach to management research providing a framework through which it is possible to examine the political nature of management and organizations.

Keywords: *critical theory; social research; Habermas.*

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ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ДІЄЮ ТА КРИТИЧНІ ПІДХОДИ ДО УПРАВЛІННЯ ЯК НАУКИ

У статті проаналізовано підходи до управління як до науки в межах критичної теорії, яка суттєво критикує позитивізм та заперечує існування нейтральної мови спостережень. За критичною теорією дослідник може впливати на результати власних досліджень через вже накопичений досвід. Дж. Габермас, один із засновників критичної теорії, наголошував на тому, що дискусії необхідна "ситуація ідеальної мови". Наші ж засоби аналізу та інтерпретації емпіричних даних "забруднені" різними соціокультурними чинниками та чуттєвим досвідом дослідника. Критична теорія — це цінний та доволі цікавий підхід до досліджень в галузі управління, зокрема, задля опису сутності управління та організації.

Ключові слова: *критична теорія; соціальні дослідження; Габермас.*
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Майкл Дент, Эдвард Вонг Сек Хин, Мохд Назари бин Исмаил
ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ДЕЙСТВИЕМ И КРИТИЧЕСКИЕ ПОДХОДЫ К УПРАВЛЕНИЮ КАК НАУКИ

В статье проанализированы подходы к управлению как к науке в рамках критической теории, которая существенно критикует позитивизм и отрицает существование нейтрального языка наблюдений. Согласно критической теории, исследователь может влиять на результаты собственного исследований, исходя из накопленного опыта. Дж. Габермас, один из основоположников критической теории, настаивал на том, что для открытой и честной дискуссии необходима "ситуация идеальной речи". Наши же способы анализа и интерпретации эмпирических данных "загрязнены" различными социокультурными факторами и чувственным опытом исследователя. Критическая теория — это ценный и довольно интересный подход к исследованиям в области управления, в частности, к описанию сущности управления и организации.

Ключевые слова: *критическая теория; социальные исследования; Габермас.*

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Introduction. Critical theory has some similarities with postmodernism. Critical theory focuses upon the inherent connection between politics, values and knowledge and, thereby, provokes a deeper consideration of politics and the values which underpin and legitimize the authority of "scientific" knowledge (Alvesson and Willmott, 1988). If traced back through history, critical theory is sourced from the Frankfurt School and a number of important research topics were addressed in the early works of this School of thought, including the nature and emergence of Fascism, authority and family, art and popular culture, human freedom (Wong, 2003, 2004). In this paper we focus particularly on the work of Habermas, the link between critical theory and management research, conceptualizations of management, the Habermasian approach, and the role of a researcher.

Habermas. Habermas was born on June 18, 1929 and is a German sociologist and philosopher in the tradition of critical theory and pragmatism. He is perhaps best known for his concepts of "communicative rationality" and "public sphere". His work focuses on the foundations of social theory and epistemology. Habermas is also known for his work on the concept of modernity, particularly with respect to the discussions on "rationalization" originally set by Max Weber.

Positivism's presupposition of a theory-neutral observational language allows the positivists ignore the effects of the epistemic subject (i.e., the knower) concerning what is known. For Habermas, knowledge is contaminated at the source by the influence of socio-cultural factors upon sensory experience. Habermas identifies two forms of knowledge with their attendant ontological domains, each deriving from specific human interests that he suggests have naturally developed during human evolution. The first knowledge domain, that of empirical-analytical science, emphasizes the human interest in our creative interplay with the attempts for exerting control over the natural environment. The second knowledge domain is that of historical-hermeneutic science emphasizing the human "practical" interest that arises from the need for inter-personal communication where humans encounter others as speaking, thinking and acting subjects who have to be understood symbolically. For Habermas, although there is an independent reality, this externality only becomes knowable to people through action and mediation of our "anthropologically deep seated interests". Habermas later identifies the third knowledge constitutive interest that is an emancipatory interest that seeks to free people from domination. The forms of knowledge used for this project is self-knowledge and understanding generated through self-reflection.

In sum, as with Kuhn's conventionalism, Habermas challenges positivism by attacking its claims to a theory-neutral observational language, and this is accomplished by arguing that the object domains of the forms of knowledge and their criteria of validity are constituted by self-interest. Therefore, reality is only knowable through the operation of interest-laden modes of engagement.

For Habermas, although such a consensus is not attained in everyday social interaction due to operations of power and domination, it is both presupposed in, and has potential in, any communication. Thus, the extent to which actual communication deviates from the ideal one, and hence from the truth, depends upon the degree of repression in a society. The goal of Habermas' critical theory is "a form of life free from unnecessary domination in all its forms is inherent in the notion of truth" (McCarthy, 1978). So, through his development of the ideal speech situation it is evi-

dent that Habermas adopts a conventionalist position that deploys a consensus theory of truth used as a regulative standard that is able to assess the extent of systematically distorted communication. In this sense, critical theory 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 practically and subtly shape its members' lives.

In sum, Habermas has several main criticisms of postmodernism:

1.   Postmodernists are unclear about the origins of knowledge (positivism's presupposition of a theory-neutral observational language allows the positivists ignore the effects of the epistemic subject upon what is known).

2.   Habermas accuses postmodernism of being a totalizing perspective, meaning that the same scenario can be applied to all, and that scenario fails "to differentiate phenomena and practices that occur within modern society".

3.   Habermas asserts that postmodernists ignore what Habermas finds absolutely central — truth actually comes from the public through eye of researchers.

Critical theory and management research. At the general level, the aim of critical theoretic approaches to management is to understand how practices and institutions of management are developed and legitimized within the relationships of power and domination such as in capitalism and fundamental to this approach is the belief that these systems can be transformed to enable participants' emancipation. This is achieved by a process through which individuals and groups become free from repressive social and ideological conditions that restrict the development and expression of human consciousness. However, emancipation is not about reengineering of work practices by management to give workers greater autonomy and thereby increase their motivation as this would merely represent an alternative way of privileging the aims of management. Rather, the process of emancipation must involve a continuing process of critical self-reflection and associated self-transformation.

As Parker (1995) contends, because truth is seen as a temporary consensus, values become of central importance when adopting a critical perspective. Thus, as Habermas argues, knowledge must discard the illusion of objectivism which "prevents consciousness of the interlocking of knowledge with interests from the lifeworld" (Habermas, 1971). Nor does critical theory advocate the abandonment of epistemological questions. Instead, as Habermas has argued, different kinds of science are understood to be embedded in different kinds of human interests (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). For emancipation to take place there is a need to counter the influence of "scientism" which occurs when "we no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge but rather identify knowledge with science" (Habermas, 1971).

In the field of management and organization studies, Alvesson and Deetz (1996) indicate two different approaches that have been used in developing critical theory, namely ideology critique and managerial ideology. Ideology critique often appears in ad hoc and reactive situations, where a researcher is seeking to explain what has happened in the past rather than to predict the future. Management ideology overemphasizes communication and ways in eliminating communication barriers, and fundamental to both approaches to critical theory is the focus on the emancipatory power of reason.

Conceptualisations of management. The main underlying metaphors of traditional management theory are functionalist. As a result of this functionalist approach,

organizations are often assumed to be unified wholes with management goals representing everyone within an organization. Willmott (1995) discusses how this rational, technocratic notion of management is best seen in the representation of management knowledge as science, arguing that this helps in securing the exercise of managerial prerogative. Critical theory fights against this tendency and this theory believes that each employee has a different voice. The critical theory epistemological position is to dismiss existing management theory as an expression of technocratic thinking that seeks to constrain human potential and aspiration in order to explore true human personifications within an organization. The importance of organizational survival is often stressed and that vested human interests are something to be eradicated, as they are considered a dysfunctional element of organizational life.

There remains a good deal of debate about the role of managers from a critical perspective and whether they should be also be considered as an oppressed group suitable for research. This is an area we hope to examine in the future. As mentioned previously, there has been a tendency to view management as a homogeneous group by some critical theorists, particularly those inspired by Marx. The focus has been, up to now, on the fundamental conflict between groups within organizations (management and workers) and insufficient attention has been given to differences and conflicts within these two groups. Thus debates continue as to the way in which critical theory can be used in management studies and whether there are risks that it could be used to reinforce rather than challenge the dominant elite. Fundamental to this approach is that management is seen as a social and political phenomenon rather than a technical function, and this approach, coupled with the emancipatory ideal, clearly impacts upon the approach to a research methodology and the relationship between researcher and researched.

The Habermasian approach. John Forrester uses Habermas' theory of communicative action as the basis for analyzing text from a municipal staff meeting to show the impact of power relations upon the planning process. He argues that doing fieldwork in a Habermasian way enables the researchers to examine processes and outcomes in the relations of power. However, doing research in Habermasian way is demanding as it is challenging to achieve consensus among respondents.

Participation and Critical Theory. Kincheloe and McLaren (1998) as well as Sayer (1992) later employed critical theory in conducting research in a more temperate manner, where a questionnaire and open-ended format and anonymous method were used. Reason (1998) later discussed 3 approaches to participative research cooperative inquiry, participatory action research and action inquiry, each of which he argues could be seen to be informed by a critical theoretic approach.

Cooperative inquiry directly involves people being researched in undertaking the research process. This primarily concerns participatory action research and reducing concerns for epistemology and methodology (Reason, 1998) with two objectives: one is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group and the second is to empower people through raising consciousness. Whilst some researchers have applied the term to their work in Western organizations, others claim that the origins of participatory action research in under-privileged parts of the world make it inappropriate for Western organizations and societies. Action research refers as a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order

to improve rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices by qualitative ways. Fundamental to these 3 approaches is that research makes difference to individuals' experience and that those who are being researched play an active role in the process, rather than being passive subjects.

The role of a researcher and their relationship with the researched. Harvey (1990) argued that conventional relationship between a researcher and a researched assumed by positivist stance is contrary to the aims of critical theory because the positivist epistemological position presupposes one-way flow of information which leaves a respondent in exactly the same position after having shared knowledge and ignores the self-reflexive process thatis imparting the information.

Emancipatory values. What had been assumed by positivism is contrary to critical theory as positivism expresses the role of a researcher as just an explorer where a researcher will not influence the results, the research results are considered value free. However, according to critical theory, the ways in which we analyze and interpret empirical data are contaminated by the researcher's socio-cultural background and sensory experience, the results of a positivist's research cannot be treated as indisputable fact. Hence, since the acceptance that knowledge is not independent of personal interests and values, some analysts argue that "validity" may be an inappropriate term in the critical research context. In contrast, why should we proceed if the results are not valid?

Conclusions. Critical theory provides a powerful critique of positivism as it rejects the idea of a theory-neutral observational language, by showing how knowledge is underpinned by values and interests. As for the role of researchers, critical theory believes they are able to influence the results based on their accumulated experiences.

Habermas voiced criticism of the processes of modernization, where he saw modernization as an inflexible direction forced through by economic and administrative rationalisation, and he describes it as where "communication within these institutions is systematically distorted". He urges that public life cannot develop where public matters are not discussed by citizens. An "ideal speech situation" requires participants to have the same capacities of discourse and social equality, and in this version of the consensus theory of truth, Habermas maintains that truth is what would be agreed upon in an ideal speech situation. Once we achieve an ideal speech situation where communicative distortions are removed, then we are able to assess the validity of particular claims to truth in an open and honest debate.

Looking into the conceptualisations of management, the main underlying metaphors of traditional management theory are functionalist. As the result of this functionalist approach, organizations are often assumed to be unified wholes with management goals representing everyone within an organization. Critical theory fights against this tendency as the belief is that each employee has a different voice and functionalism seeks to constrain human potential and desire to debate the conflict within and among people within an organization.

The Habermasian approach has been widely used in doing fieldwork, because the Habermasian way enables researchers to examine processes and outcomes of relations of power while doing research, but this manner of research is demanding as it is challenging to achieve consensus among the respondents.

Emancipatory values matter, what was assumed by a positivist stance is contrary to critical theory as in positivism the role of a researcher is only an explorer because

researchers are not be allowed to influence the results so that a research remains, apparently, value free. However, according to critical theory, the ways in which we, as researchers, analyse and interpret empirical data, the results are contaminated by a researcher's socio-cultural factors and sensory experience.

Lastly, even though there is a number of problematic issues here, critical theory is an interesting approach to management research as it provides a framework through which it is possible to examine the political nature of management and organizations. It provides a standpoint from which to critique management processes and institutions. We hope to elucidate further on this with regard to specific management research in our future papers.

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