Critical Theory in Management Research

Cheok Mui Yee¹, Chong Wei Ying, Edward Wong Sek Khin

Abstract

This paper investigates Critical theory within management research. Critical Theory is a set of epistemology that seeks human emancipation. It provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all forms. Thus, critical theories have emerged in connection with the many social movements that identify varied dimension of the domination of human beings in modern societies. It is usually associated with the Frankfurt school theorists: Habermas. Critical theory science with insights from psychoanalysis is characterized by interdisciplinary, reflective, dialectical and critical. It is an interesting approach towards management research. A number of problematic issues arise, as we conducted management research within critical theory framework. By addressing these issues thoroughly, it is assured that knowledge and theoretical assumptions underlying this study are clearly explained and are supported with justified research methodology so that the research findings are warranted. Particularly, this study adopts a predominantly objectivist epistemology and, subsequently a critical theoretical perspective is used to select appropriate research methodology.

Keywords: Critical theory, Habermas, management research

1. Introduction

Critical theory focuses upon social science and humanities. It examines and criticizes society and culture issues such as exploitation, asymmetrical power relations, distorted communication and false consciousness. There are many similarities between critical theory and postmodernism. Nevertheless, Critical theory criticizes postmodernism in three aspects. First, the language that used to express autonomy, right and justice in postmodernism are ambiguous. Second,
emphasis on desire and pleasure has made postmodernism individualist. Finally, its rejection of
theory and rational critique is irrational (Best and Kellner, 1991).

Generally, critical theory is associated with the Frankfurt school theorists: Max Horkheimer,
Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse (Pusey, 1987). Their works are aimed at human
emancipation and opposed to various forms of domination and social repression in the modern
capitalist world. Adorno and Horkheimer criticized Cartesian-based epistemology with
instrumental reason. Hockheimer further argue that rather than seeing human as a passive object,
we should see human as active participant in society and culture. Habermas as a successor of
Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse reconstitute the whole paradigm of critical theory (Pusey,
1987).

1.1 Habermas

Habermas (1974; 1977) challenges positivists’ empirical commitments and the possibility of
natural certainty observational language. He believes that language is intertwined with socio and
cultural experience. His works resonate within the traditions of Kant through his acceptance of
phenomenalist position. He eschews positivism’s objective illusion and replaces the empiricism
with a constructivism. He purported that reality can only become an object of human knowledge
through identified and evaluated.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of science</th>
<th>Cognitive interest</th>
<th>Social domain</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tr>
<td>Natural science</td>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Prediction control</td>
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<td>(empirical±analytical)</td>
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<td>Practical</td>
<td>Language/culture</td>
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<td>(hermeneutics)</td>
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<td>consensus</td>
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<td>Critical science</td>
<td>Emancipatory</td>
<td>Power/authority</td>
<td>Enlightenment</td>
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Table 1 Difference Between The Forms Of Knowledge

The three knowledge-constitutive interests; Source: Mingers, 1992
Habermas believes that society must be understood as a mix of three major interests: work, interaction and power. Reality is only knowable through engage in the operation interest-laden mode. McCarthy (1978) remarks that Habermas has involve with relativism and reject the notion of objectivity through tying knowledge to society. Nevertheless, Habermas tried to escape from relativism.

Social order naturally leads to power distribution; yet, a natural interest in being freed from domination also comes from the application of power. Power leads to distorted communication, but by becoming aware of the ideologies that dominate in society, groups can themselves be empowered to transform society. Habermas attempts to resolve systematically distorted communication through the notion of ideal speech situation. In ideal speech situation, everybody has the equal chance to take part in discourse. However, he acknowledges that ideal speech situation is difficult to obtain in everyday social interaction.

Habermas proposed that no aspect of life is interest free. Knowledge is influence by values and interest. The aim of Habermas’ critical theory is to emancipated society from any institutionalized domination and seeks to investigate how distorted communicative actions shape the society (Grice and Humphries, 1997).

1.2 Critical Theory And Management Research

Many researches into management adopt a functionalist approach. They seek to rationalize managerial values and reinforce the managerial prerogative (Willmott, 1995). At first glance, critical theory which opposed to any form of domination contradicted management research which institutionalized domination. However, understand of management is made possible by critical theory examination of the political and negotiates aspects of management.

Critical theory tends to emphasize more at abstract level rather than empirical research. Critical approaches to management involves a process which showing the underpinned management values and interest rather than accurate knowledge of the reality of management (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). According to Habermas, knowledge is identified with science.

It is important to differentiate critical thinking and critical theory. Many researchers are critical thinkers but may not necessarily operate their research within a critical theory perspective. Many writers, such as Calhoun (1995), Prasad and Caproni (1997), have made their efforts in distinguish
critical thinking and critical theory. Alvesson and Deetz (1996) developed critical theory by two different approaches: ideology critique and reformulate Habermas’ critical theory. Both approaches focus on the emancipator power of reason.

The research strategies to critical theory are both phenomenological and interpretative structuralism (Morrow and Brown, 1994). From this perspective, critical social research can use various data collection and analysis techniques. Nevertheless, the focus is normally in ethnography. Critical ethnography is a critical and empirical research that encompasses the understanding of the culture and the social. The difference between critical ethnography and conventional ethnography is not clear. However, the key issue here is critical ethnography obeying the emancipator interest through exposing oppressive practices in organizations. Morrow and Brown point out that the contributions of critical ethnography are not merely its descriptive and explanatory value also include ideology critique which demystified the hidden power relations.

2. Research Methodology for Critical Theory Approach

Research methodology describes a plan of action or design behind selection of a particular research method and how to link them towards desired outcomes. Different approaches will be applied depends upon the underlying theoretical stance taken. In this study, survey approach will be adopted as a methodology to gather relevant data from the sample. The logical reasoning behind such adoption of technique is to ensure the richness of information gathered so that the researcher can better understand results analysed from statistical approach.

Hence, Critical Theory as a research methodology expects quantitative analyses of various types, as numbers show the research conclusions based upon certain mathematical processes. In general, mathematics is truth writ large, and can withstand attacks upon its conclusions if the uses of proven mathematical processes are shown.

Qualitative analyses, however, is being accepted more and more as a basis of valid and true conclusions, and these conclusions have been about by using logical processes and while positivists may underestimate the value of qualitative analyses, no longer are they underestimated as they have been in history.

However, from the nineteenth century, interpretations using rigorous quantitative methods have been developed to high levels of sophistication and ask similar questions as qualitative analyses,
but offers mathematical and scientifically valid conclusions that qualitative methods must use language to describe. There are serious questions that any language is adequate for all questions. There is no other response than it must be that mathematics should fill the gaps that language cannot, and this is found in the movement towards more rigorous quantitative research (Marsh, 1979).

The disputes between these two approaches, at times, are broad and growing, as the diversity of acceptance of a conclusion, using whatever methodology is arguable, depending upon which side one takes. However, positivism still holds its dominate position, even when dealing with the workings of organizations.

Johnson and Duberley discuss not the disputes between these two methods but the commonalities of both social and natural science. Natural science is the basis of using the experimental methods of natural science in a social science situation, particularly in cause and effect investigations.

Part of the research in the social sciences is the adoption of experiment design, a combination of random choice and control groups, the positivist’s classical experiment design, one that yields high levels of internal validity. Within this approach, Aronson and Carlsmith (1986), enquired the necessity of experimental realism coupled with mundane realism, that which surrounds the experiment, which may be important as or more important than the experiment itself. One may look no further than the Hawthorne Experiment to show this point.

Campbell and Stanley (1963) developed another approach of quasi-experimentation to develop analyses in the field.

Surveys generally supply correlations and not cause at a particular point in time, but remain a mainstay of positivist social science research. The process is a systematic collection of quantifiable data to establish a relationship among variables to show patterns of association (Bryman, 1992)

3. The Habermasian Approach

Forrester (1993) has conducted empirical studies within the Habermasian approach. This approach enables them to examine the process and the outcomes of relations of power. The researchers’ and
researched interest and value are the focus of the research. The problematic issues here is ideal speech situation is very difficult to obtain. Hence the discourse might be distorted.

Positivists and some interpretivists always criticize critical theory is a speculative opinion because of their rejection of value neutrality, views and values of the researcher may suppressed the false consciousness of the researched, and intellectualism (Roman, 1992). Furthermore, some writers question whether there are clear public criteria for success and failure of emancipation (Geuss, 1982; Hammersley, 1992).

Researchers raise questions on studies using Habermas Framework. First, they cannot certain whether ideal speech situation is possible since values, interest and knowledge is intertwining within the socio-culture context (Hammersley, 1992). Secondly, the role of power in agreement is ambiguous (Payne, 1996). Thirdly, there might be consensus collusion among researchers (Reason, 1998). Finally, Layder remarks that Habermas confuse understanding with agreement and ignore the facts that communication may not lead to substantive and concrete agreement.

4. Conclusion

Critical theorists criticized the positivist’s idea of theory-neutral observational language and some neopositivist interpretative approaches. It is inherently reflective. Hence, both researchers and the researched have to aware their own presupposition and values which might distort communication. Furthermore, it asserts that reality and knowledge are an ongoing dynamic process. The way the authors view the reality and the way the reality is reciprocally determine each other. Validity claims of truth can only be assess under ideal speech situation.

Critical theory aims to bring understanding and identifying progressive aspects of modern society. It emphasize in create social and political condition that enlighten human from repressive force. Habermas’s works is more than an extension of the work of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. He take a deep concern in emancipate human and enlighten the society through the creation of truly democratic institutions capable of withstanding the corrosive effect of capitalism. Nevertheless, critical theory enables us to examine the political and negotiates aspects of management. In brief, critical is a theory of communication and is a form of self-reflective knowledge. It enables apprehension and theoretical explain knowledge that emancipate human and enlighten the society through expanding the scope of autonomy and reducing the scope of domination.
References


