Interpretive and Critical Research Traditions

Theresa (Terri) Thorkildsen

Professor of Education and Psychology

University of Illinois at Chicago
Meaning can be distinguished from function...

**Meaning**—an interpretive stance that seeks to understand regularities.

**Function**—a causal stance that seeks to explain regularities.

*Winch, 1982*
Researchers can seek to *identify* regularities and understand their *meaning*.

OR

Researchers can seek to *explain* regularities and recognize their *function*.

*Winch, 1982*
Pragmatists—reduce objectivity to solidarity so as to define truth as the best of possible options, replacing weaker approaches with stronger ones.

Realists—seek to ground solidarity in objectivity so as to define truth as a correspondence with reality.

Rorty, 1985
Common Ethical Stances

**Universalism**—Moral truths are cross-culturally universal and grounded in basic human rights.

**Particularism**—Moral truths are grounded in the purposes for various social spheres such as economics, politics, education, work.

**Relativism**—Moral truths do not exist, but ethical decisions are grounded in immediate situational detail.

*Rawls, 1971; Rorty, 1985; Walzer, 1983*
A Universalistic Stance

Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought.

A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust.

Rawls, 1971, p. 3
The idea of the original position is to set up fair procedure so that any principles agreed to will be just.

Somehow we must nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put [people] at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage. ...

I assume that the parties are situated behind a veil of ignorance. They do not know how the various alternatives will affect their own particular case and they are obligated to evaluate principles solely on the basis of general considerations.

Rawls, 1971, pp. 136-137
**Culture and Universalism**

*Etic theories*—descriptions of behavior or beliefs by an observer, in terms that can be applied to other cultures; that is, an etic account attempts to be "culturally neutral."

*Triandis & Martin, 1983*
A Particularist Stance

One way to begin the [research] enterprise is to walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain, fashion for oneself an objective and universal standpoint. But I mean to stay in the cave, in the city, on the ground.

Well enough to detect bias.

Walzer, 1983, p. xiv
Culture and Particularism

_Ecological theories_—studies of the interaction between observable contexts and human functioning. In this approach, culture must be defined in relation to the problem under investigation well enough to create a bounded system that limits the scope of inquiry.

_Bronfenbrenner, 1979_
A Relativistic Stance

Someone who seeks solidarity does not ask about the practices of a chosen community and something outside the community but rather situates him or herself within the community. Objectivity in this respect involves a distancing of the self from other people in the community.

Rorty, 1985, p. 3
Two ways humans try to put their lives in a larger context to make meaning.

**Solidarity**--tell the story of their commitments and contributions to a community (may be historical, actual, imaginary, distant).

**Objectivity**--represent themselves as standing in immediate relation to nonhuman reality.

*Rorty, 1985*
**Emic theories**-descriptions of behavior or beliefs in terms meaningful (consciously or unconsciously) to the actor; that is, an emic account comes from a person within the culture. Almost anything from within a culture can provide an emic account.

*Triandis & Martin, 1983*
Interpretivist’s Epistemological Stance

An interpretivist’s stance is grounded in a constructivist epistemology. Adherents uniformly reject the “spectator view” of knowledge.

Knowledge IS NOT built up piece by piece through the accumulation of “neutral” observations.

Knowledge IS culturally and historically contingent, serves particular interests and purposes, and is laden with moral and political values.

Howe, 1998
What is wrong with the idea that interpretive understanding is logically incomplete?

Winch, 1982
A debate within the interpretive tradition...

**Post-modernists**—abandon the emancipatory modernist project of crafting a scientifically neutral, impersonal language to describe and interpret human activities.

**Transformationists**—accept that, though flawed, much of the modernist project can and should be pursued using new techniques.

*Howe, 1998*
Post-modernists...

Reject attempts to construct meta-narratives or grand epistemological stories about things like the progress of science or of political emancipation. Such narratives only induce fear and domination.

Rationality is irremediably historical and contingent.

“Regimes of truth” serve to “normalize” persons, rendering them acquiescent and useful to the institutions of modernity.

*Foucault, 1987*
Transformationists...

Reject the notion of ultimate truth, but note that all projects need a place to start and an ultimate destination.

The task of researchers is to work out defensible conceptions of knowledge and rationality that embrace the contingent qualities of human experience as their basis.

Scientific theories are valid only in the extent to which they offer a better handling of the target problem than any competitors.

*Howe, 1998*
Interpretivists’ criteria for evaluating a theory’s worthiness

- Enhances solidarity.
- Fosters inter-subjective agreement in a community.
- Offers a better way of being.
- Acknowledges contingency.

*Rorty, 1985*
There is nothing wrong with science, only with the attempt to divinize it, the attempt characteristic of “realistic” philosophy.

Rorty, 1985, p. 16
**Critical Social Theory** is a multidisciplinary framework with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge.

This framework promotes critical thinking, broadly conceived. Deprived of opportunities for historical analysis in its material and discursive forms, students experience their education in its alienated and abstract form.

*Leonardo, 2004, p. 11*
Looking at the names of things can offer clues about the authors’ intended meaning.

In Leonardo’s representation of *Critical Social Theory*, why is theory singular if this is a group of theories and multidisciplinary?

Why did Michael Apple use the plural, *theories*, to represent his approach?

How can one *theory* be multidisciplinary?
Critical Social Theory pushes ideas and frameworks to their limits, usually by highlighting their contradictions.

In quality education, criticism functions to cultivate students’ ability to question, deconstruct, and then reconstruct knowledge in the interest of emancipation.

Can *Critical Social Theory* exist if all theories are fundamentally flawed?

If Modernist agendas were emancipatory, what is different about critical theories?

Is there a better name for this tradition, more consistent with paradigmatic assumptions?

Any idea what neo-liberalism means?
THAT'S TRUE IN THEORY...

BUT IT'S NOT TRUE IN ANOTHER THEORY.

AREN'T THEORIES GREAT? IN THEORY.

HALF FULL.

HALF EMPTY.

HEY, CAN I GET A TWIST OVER HERE?

☐ OPTIMIST
☐ PESSIMIST
☐ PRAGMATIST
References


