Critical Paradigm: A Preamble for Novice Researchers

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Abstract: The positive and constructive paradigms have typically been popular among researchers as two main approaches to scientifically investigate issues of life and social sciences. Particularly novice researchers unconsciously tend to fit their studies in one of the framework set up by either of these approaches. This paper develops arguments in the perspective of paradigmatic issues in research to highlight the comparatively young paradigm of critical theory which has not yet gained due projection. The discussion informs on how critical approach to research may gain equally, or even more, valuable insight not only by analyzing and exploring the situation but also by offering a change agenda for reformation. The paper also appraises one of the critical research tools, critical discourse analysis in depth, to elaborate the philosophical and theoretical basis of this research methodology in order to enhance awareness among novice researchers investigating under the umbrella of critical paradigm.

1. Introduction

Selecting an appropriate paradigmatic framework is crucial for researchers because a paradigm, as Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest, provides with the world of views that defines the nature of the world as well as the range of possibilities for its holders in relation to reality. In other words ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns shape the dimensions of any paradigm. Richards (2003) is also of the same opinion that a paradigmatic position can be represented in terms of ontology and epistemology which have to deal with the value of our beliefs about both of these. This reflects that any paradigm is not only different in term of methodologies but also in term of basic philosophies. The question of paradigmatic choice to determine the suitability of a research area has always been challenging for novice researchers. Researchers usually oscillate between the positivist and constructive paradigms as to form the background of their research in order to achieve valid data. This predominant popularity of positivistic and constructive fashion for investigating knowledge has led to ignoring a relatively newer but potentially stronger paradigm of critical theory.

With the advent of critical paradigm, I believe that the bipolar era of constructive and positivistic approaches is likely to turn into critical and non-critical approaches. Non-critical paradigms only present what is observable in a situation, whereas critical paradigm, because if its inherent reformative fervour, goes beyond mere recording observations, and strives to reform for a better world. In order to elaborate the potential of critical paradigm, and to put

the same in perspective, the following section gives an overview of non-critical paradigms.

2. Constructivist VS Positivist

Categorization of quantitative and qualitative research has given rise to a considerable debate among the researchers. Positivism is thought of as a paradigm (also known as scientific paradigm) comprised of a series of beliefs about the nature of things (Mark: 1996). Differentiating between positivistic and constructive approaches, Holliday (2002) observes that the rigour of positivistic research is in the disciplined application of prescribed rules for instrument design whereas the qualitative research has a principled development of strategies to suit the scenario being studied. Positivists look at the issue in a predetermined way through certain measurable instruments (e.g. survey, questionnaire etc) to confirm or reject the hypothesis.

Constructive research, Holliday (2002) observes, finds its channels to exploration while it develops its knowledge of the reality. It does not adopt pre-determined methods or instruments; rather it decides the course of action according to the needs of the situation. This indicates that qualitative research studies issues in their context and attempts to interpret the meaning out of it. Since qualitative research construct a world of its own on the hermeneutic pattern to achieve *vershtein*, it tends to follow the constructive paradigm. Rossuiau & Rallis (1998) mention four major paradigms as shown in figure 1. They have convincingly divided the paradigm of critical theory into further two that gives more flexibility to researchers to observe their

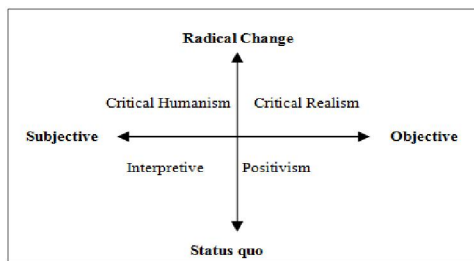constraints, research targets and the kind of research they are doing.

Figure 1 (Rossiau & Rallis (1998)

Denzin & Lincoln (2000) observe that positivists view reality as "to be studied, captured and understood" in the outer world. This type of approach does not necessarily present an accurate view of reality; rather it gives a limited picture of the problem in hand. The world it represents is very small, and might be stranger to us for it may even distort the reality (Swann & Pratt: 2003) because of non-contextual study of the subject. Positivists use scientific methodology that is comprised of empiricism, objectivity and control, the key features of the scientific process. Based on these three canons of inquiry the scientific process can be viewed as cyclical process with theories leading to predictions, predictions to observation, and observation to generalizations that have implications for theories (figure 2).
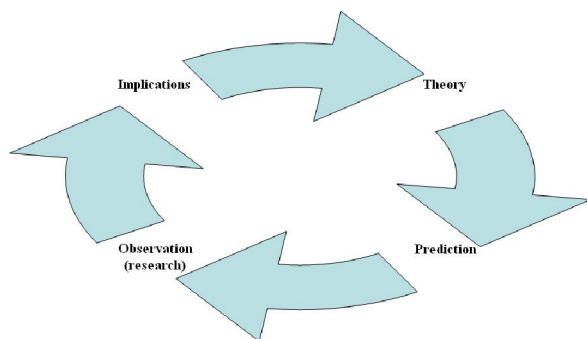

Figure 2: Cyclic Process of Scientific Research

The language of positivists is numerical and empirical as compared to constructivists who use descriptive language to describe their research. Objective and empirical nature of positivistic inquiry is objectionable because of its detached approach towards the study of subjects out of context. However because of its empirical and objective nature reality can be observed, studied and confirmed whenever required.

Denzin & Lincoln (2000) argue that constructive paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (i.e. there are multiple realities), a subjective epistemology (i.e. knower and respondent cocreate understandings), and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures. The reality involves individual perceptions and interaction with the environment. It cannot be observed or studied out of context. It is rather interpreted in the light of all the factors involved in the phenomenon. As compared to positivistic approach which uses a pre-determined rout to discovery, constructivism tends to choose a variety of methods to suit its goals and objectives that serve the purpose of treating ontology, epistemology and the nature of the world accordingly. Qualitative research has some disadvantages which are not addressed, for one reason or the other, as are done those of quantitative research. First qualitative research can only deal with small number of data. Secondly, Silverman (2005) observes that in qualitative research there is no single agreed model available, which provides unnecessary liberty and flexibility to the researcher. However, this flexibility might be a disadvantage only in case of inexperienced researchers. This flexibility in approach is rather emphasized by pos-positivists who believe that the researcher's personal biases, background, assumptions and values can affect the research outcome, and hence the objectivity should be achieved by recognize identifying the possible effects of biases (Robson, 2002).

Post-positivism has discarded the belief that quantitative research might be appropriate for one type of disciplines (e.g. life sciences, or some social sciences) whereas constructive approach is suitable for rest of the discipline. Quantitative research is not exact even in life sciences which it is considered to be the best for. Mark (1996) finds that all the scientific propositions are probability statements. He argues that in description of the atom, the exact location of electrons can never be determined. Post-positivists have also accepted the idea that all scientific knowledge is potentially subject to the discovery of error and therefore should be regarded as provisional (Swann & Pratt 2003). Richards (2003) and Silverman (2005) rightly suggest that qualitative research is not always appropriate, nor is the quantitative research. It entirely depends on the research problem that determines the appropriate route to discovery or exploration. In other words:

> "We are not faced then, with a stark choice between words and numbers, or even between precise and imprecise data; but rather with a range from more to less precise data". (Hammerseley, 1992: 163)

To sum up, doing qualitative research does not mean a divorce to quantitative data or vice versa because no researcher, as Richards (2003) says, begins a project by deciding on a paradigm and working things out from this at increasing levels of detail. Researchers cannot enjoy such a flexibility or liberty while confining themselves to the boundaries of a single paradigm. They need to rise above to find wide horizons to meet the challenging nature of complex quest of 21st century and critical theory provides a platform for a more flexible, more qualitative and in depth analysis of research questions.

3. Critical Paradigm

Critical theory is historically related with three leading critical theorists of original Frankfurt School. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse represented the first systematic effort to employ traditional empirical research techniques to the refinement and testing of proposition derived from the Marxist tradition. Horkheimer (1982: 244), one of the founders of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory, defines the term:

> *(Critical theory) seeks human emancipation to liberate human being from the circumstances that enslave them.*

Critical theory is in contrast to traditional theory that explores and confirms the status quo whereas critical theory challenges the status quo and strives for a balanced and democratic society. It is particularly concerned with the issue of power relations within the society and interaction of race, class, gender, education, economy, religion and other social institutions that contribute to a social system. Horkheimer's definition suggests three criteria for an adequate critical theory, also observed by Bohman (2005):

i.   It must be explanatory about what is wrong with current social reality.
ii.   It must identify the action to change it.
iii.   It must provide both clear norms for criticism and transformation.

These criteria entitle critical theory of literally and virtually being three dimensional which assigns critical theorists not merely to explore the problem, but also to identify the ways and strategies which could ensure a successful implication in the society. Horkheimer is influenced by Marxist notion of supremacy of economy over all social aspects. However, Kincheloe & McLaren (2000) disagree with Marx's notion that 'base' determines 'superstructures' because they see other multiple forms of power including the racial, gender and sexual axis of domination. By this, they do not mean that economy is unimportant but they claim that economic factors can never be separated from other

axis of oppression. Critical theory does not intend only to highlight and explain these social factors that cause oppressive and powerful groups to dominate the suppressed and repressed section of society, but also strives for a social set up based on equality for all the members.

While critical theory is often thought as narrowly as referring to the Frankfurt school, any philosophical approach with similar practical aims could fall under the umbrella of critical theory such as feminism, critical race theory etc (Bohman, 2013). Critical theory is interpreted by various researchers differently and avoids too much specificity allowing room for disagreement (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Kincheloe and McLaren refer that to several versions of critical theory including classical critical theory which is mostly closely related to neo-Marxist theory; post-positivist formulation which divorce themselves from Marxist theory but are positivist in their insistence on conventional rigor criteria; and post modernist, post structulist or constructivist oriented varieties which reject the concept of objective research and criticise the political-economic system that exploits the proletariat.   Denzin & Lincoln (2007) tend to combine all these theories when they refer to their common features. They assert that Feminist, ethic, Marxist, cultural studies and queer theory would privilege a materialistic ontology. Denzin et al (2007) also believe that it is the real world that makes a material difference in term of race, class and gender. Subjectivist epistemologies and methodologies are also employed. Empirical material and theoretical arguments are evaluated in term of emancipatory implication. Critical theory is open in the sense that it not only embraces constructive possibilities (Morrow, 1994; Richards, 2003) but also accepts empirical techniques (Morrow, 1994; Cohen, Manion & Marrison, 2000). However, this should not suggest a complete harmony between critical theory and the other two paradigms. On the other hand, arguments made for critical paradigm do not intend to suggest dissolution of other approaches. It is only to emphasize that critical paradigm is more philosophical, and hence more accommodating by nature as compared to other paradigms that are more methodological and less concerned with the independent nature of truth or reality of life.

3.1. Research techniques in critical theory

In order to achieve the emancipatory target, critical theorists have used various methodologies. There is no concept of 'critical methodology' in the critical paradigms as we find with constructivists and positivists. A defining characteristics of critical research methodology is the choices that allow linking theories and methods as an ongoing process

that is contextually bound and not pre-determined (Morrow, 1994). Critical theory is flexible to adopt any methodology or technique which could help in suggesting betterment in the unbalanced social system. Hussain, Elyas and Naseef (2013) also observe that critical researchers may use qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. However, Hussain et al. (2013) believe that critical research is more inclined towards qualitative research designs. The major difference here between critical and constructive research is the innate reformative drives in the former. Nevertheless ideology critique, critical action research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) and critical discourse analysis (Faircough, 1989, 1992a, 2003) are the typical tools for critical research. Though, Fairclogh (1999) uses the term 'critical theory', at times, concerned with critique of ideology and the effect of domination but not specifically related to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

Ideology critique is critiquing the ideology of the powerful group who use particular values and practices to exercise their power and get control over the proletariat, or the suppressed class. An ideology can be defined as an organized collection of ideas.The main purpose behind an ideology is to offer change in society through a normative thought process. Ideologies tend to be abstract thoughts applied to reality and thus make this concept unique to politics. False consciousness is a Marxist hypothesis which believes that material and institutional processes in capitalist society mislead the proletariat over the nature of capitalism. This is essentially ideological control, which the proletariat class does not know they are under. Critiquing such practices and values uncovers the vested interests of exploiting group and restores to consciousness of oppressed class.

In order to uncover the unjust and unfair and bring a change, critical action research is another tool to achieve the target. Cohen, Manion & Marrison (2000) elaborate that action research is about research that impacts on, and focuses on practice in education. It accords power to those who are operating in the context of school, curriculum etc. It empowers practitioners by giving them voice. It attempts to take account of disadvantage that effect teacher community on the basis of gender, ethnicity or any other bias. In the educational context, the teacher community can reduce their professional status empower their practices in classroom and improve the qualities of education for their pupils only by engaging in competent critical research (Kincheloe, 2003). Swann & Pratt (2003) also observe that critically informed research in practice can offer resistance to positivistic tendencies in curriculum

development that are evident in non-reflective and top-down development of standardized formats.

3.2. Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is another tool used by researchers under the critical paradigm. CDA has been quite popular with critical researchers and the following sections elaborate various characteristics of this research tool in depth. Van Dijk (2001:352) defines CDA 'as type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context'. This definition offers certain characteristics of CDA: it is analytical by nature and related to the misuse of power by some social institution on political, cultural, ethical or gender basis. The task of the critical analyst is not only to understand, but to expose and challenge the social inequality that comes to the surface as a result of critical discourse analysis. However, Fairclough (2003) notices that discourse analysis needs to be used alongside other types of analysis (e.g. sociological, ethnographic) in research on change.

CDA has significant potential and importance in the social domain for critical research and brings change in the society. Recent scholarship in the global sphere has, however, suggested that problems in systems, resource management, social action, social practices or forces of structure may be, rather, a result of language and discourse. Discourse structures create power relations in terms of how we negotiate our relative status through interchange with others (Thomas, Wareing, Singh, Peccei, Thornborrow & Jones: 2004). These dynamics of language, power and society are inter related and worth of studying from CDA view point. Thus 'the declared purpose of CDA is to expose how language is used in the socio political abuse of power' (Seidlhofer: 2003: 131). It is worthwhile to refer to Fairclough (1992b) that power is not just a matter of language rather it exists in various modalities including the concrete and unmistakable modality of physical force.

3.2.1. Approaches to CDA

Discourse has developed into diverse areas of study with a variety of disciplines within (van Dijk: 1988; Fairclough: 1992b). Fairclough (1992b) has divided the approaches to discourse into non-critical and critical approaches to discourse in order to make a clear distinction between them. By non-critical approaches he mans the framework for describing discourse (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975); ethnomethodolgical work in contrastive analysis and the modal for therapeutics in discourse analysis by social psychologists (Potter & Wethrel, 1987). He criticises non critical approaches for their failure in

considering how relation of power has shaped discourse practices and processes of social struggle and change. These approaches have their strengths and advantages but not as strong as critical approaches have.

Critical approaches to discourse are analysis of the dialectical relationship between discourse and other elements of social practices (Fairclough, 2003). It is noticeable to realize that by discourse CDA means not only language but also the forms of semiosis such as body language, paralinguistic features or visual images in a written text. While analysing a text critically the critical analyst not only focuses on the text but also the layout, photographs, diagrams, graphics etc. which provide insight into the nature of the text and the text producer. This is what Fairclough (1999) calls texture and he finds it challenging to convince discourse analyst that textual analysis should mean analysis of the texture of the text, their form and organization, and not just commentaries on the contexts of the texts which ignores texture. A textural analysis not only provides insight into what is present in the text but also gives information on the absent elements in the text, equally significant to know the text.

Fairclough (1992a; 1999) views CDA as three dimensional; text; discourse practice (interaction) and sociolinguistic practices (context). This denotes that language is a part of society and it can be interpreted in the perspective of the interaction with the context. This also reminds of the fact that culture and society are composed of discourse. Wodak (1996) says that every instance of language use makes its own contribution to reproducing or transforming culture and society, including power relations. However, the analysis of discourse practices involves attention not to analyse the text "artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discourse practices within which texts are embedded" (Van Dijk: 1988; Fairclough: 1999).

Researchers, (e.g. Barker & Galosinski, 2001; Fairclough, 1992, 2003) describe the procedure and aspects an analyst usually follows in the critical analysis. Fairclough (1999) describes certain characteristics of the procedure, summarised as under:

- Experiential, referential, expressive and metaphorical references to vocabulary used in the text.
- Experimental, relational and expressive aspects of grammar along with linking sentences.
- Use of Interactional conventions and the nature of the larger-scale structure. The former is related to the participant's ability to control turn-taking and the later deals with the order and structure of information in the discourse. (Fairclough, 1992b: 70-139).

Barker & Galasinki (2001) give some key points to consider while critically analysing the text. These include:

- Transitivity----material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal and existential processes.
- Nominalization/passivization----what is the structure of the sentence?
- Vocabulary and connotation.
- Interaction and control.
- Metalanguage.
- Given and new information structure.
- Theme-rheme structures.
- Cohesion.
- Addresses forms and address grammar.
- Shifting references of pronouns.

Both of these approaches to analyse the text critically end to be analytical by nature, and also scientific, with a focus on linguistic construction and patterns used by the text producer. This approach to CDA involves what micro analysis of the text. On one hand Fairclough (1992 b) refers that micro analysis is the best place to uncover the information. On the other hand he also suggests that micro analysis should be accompanied by a macro analysis that is more interpretative and attempts not only to decode the intentions of the text producer but also gives information on the nature of the orders of discourse. Fairclough (2003) includes the following features for CDA in this model:

- What social events is the text part of?
- Is the text part of a genre? How does it fit into other genres?
- Does the text recognise differences? Is reality hegemonised?
- What other texts are included or excluded?
- What assumptions are made in the texts?
- What are the main semantic relations? E.g. cause-sequence relation.
- How does the text accomplish Interactional function?
- How are social events and social actors represented?

The first modal by Fairclough tends to be influenced by Halliday's systemic grammar which he refers as potentially powerful for it not only analyse what is in the text but also what is absent. However he emphasizes that merely micro analysis cannot give the true picture unless this analysis is followed by an interpretation.

3.2.2. Criticism on CDA

Critical discourse analysts have achieved a considerable success in showing how the discursive fabrications of identities and realities work through the textual fabrication (MacLure: 2003). Despite its achievements CDA has received criticism both at philosophical and methodological levels. For reason of space, discussion in this paper focuses only on the major methodological criticism of CDA. Widdowson (1995) notices that CDA is an exercise in interpretation, it is invalid as analysis. (Widdowson) (1995, 199) and Pennycock (1994) also observe that no interpretation is final; every person might have different interpretation.

Fairclough (1996) claims that interpretation has two aspects: interpretation 1 is making meaning from/with spoken or written text whereas interpretation 2 is a matter of analysis, seeking to show connections between properties of text and practices of interpretation 1 in a political social space and its wider social cultural properties. Thus interpretation 1 is a part of the domain of interpretation 2. He continues responding to Widdowson's objection and says that having various interpretations does not mean it is an invalid analysis. He argues that analyses are also made differently but we don't declare them invalid. CDA cannot be completely objective in the scientific term (Fairclough: 2003), however, Fairclough believes that this particularly should not prevent CDA being perfectly good social science.

Stubbs (1993) refers that the meaning of discourse is confusing i.e. the term text and discourse are ambiguous and confusing. In this respect, Halliday (1993 in Fairclough, 1996) elaborates that discourse is a major tansdisciplinary theme in humanities and social sciences due to which it is variously understood and widely contradicted. Keeping in view this it can be safely said that it will be a futile effort to seek a single definition of discourse that could be applied and used generally in all disciplines.

Hammersley (1992) finds CDA analysts driven by overwhelming and "enlightened optimism" that seems to have some degree of validity in certain circumstances. Blending political radicalism with research may not only make the task of researchers more difficult but also diverting their attention. There is a risk that the researchers' analysis and interpretations might be distracted by their ambitious sympathy with the suppressed class which could lead partial or judgmental conclusion.

Conclusion

Selecting an appropriate research perspective to conduct effective research is not a straightforward task particularly for novice researchers. The researcher might be distracted by the popularity of one or the other particular paradigm in their environment and could be carried away with an inappropriate research perspective to end up with invalid or vague findings. On one hand it is important for researchers to select an appropriate research paradigm to launch their study, on the other hand it is equally important that they broaden their vision by opening up to new concepts and ideas. Critical research, despite having great potential to challenge and improve the status quo, has generally been ignored by researchers. It is vital that researchers discover new dimensions to explore and present their findings. Critical paradigm offers new and refreshing perspectives to explore issues and make difference not only to the world of knowledge but literally to the world itself, and these perspectives should be explored and used by modern researchers. Nevertheless, critical theory being more flexible and more independent in its pursuit of reality, puts heavier responsibility on researchers to observe, perceive, analyse and interpret the data with extra vigilance.

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