

Chapter 28

Critical Theory in Research

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ABSTRACT

Based on critical theory, this chapter focuses on the first generation of Frankfurt School (mainly to authors such as T.W. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, and W. Benjamin). For discussing methodology in research, these authors are considered more representative than the younger generation (e.g., Habermas and Honneth) mainly because of the renewed interest in the direct critique of society and because of the failure of the younger generation to produce empirical research. The proponents of critical theory establish connections between theory and practice, in the sense that the social content of research must have human dignity at its centre. The difference between method-led and content-led research is discussed and considered central for this kind of approach to empirical research. Feminist research methodologies and critical race methodology are considered as closely associated with critical theory. These different approaches have developed autonomously from critical theory and are not directly related to it. However, feminist research methodologies and critical race methodology are expounded here because of their similarities to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School aimed at providing an emancipatory approach to empirical research.

INTRODUCTION

The 'first generation' of Frankfurt School, mainly authors such as T.W. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, H. Marcuse and W. Benjamin, have a bad reputation concerning empirical research, in the sense that their critique of social injustices, and modernity more in general, was accused of having paralysing effects on the impulse of researching the circumstances of specific social conditions and social actors. However, recent scholarly studies on Adorno's Critical Theory (Benzer, 2011; Holloway, Matamoros & Tischler,

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2009; Holloway, 2010) and the influence of broader critical approaches (Bonefeld, 2014; Best, Bonefeld & O’Kane, 2018) are making the overall critical enterprise of the early Frankfurt School appealing to several fronts. Not least to those who are not satisfied with the mainstream methods of social sciences, still influenced by positivism (and indeed this term will be used to refer to mainstream social science).

This chapter then explores some fundamentals of Critical Theory’s social philosophy and social criticism considering their potentials for social research. This chapter will provide a broad induction to the approach of Critical Theory and other critical methodologies, such as Feminist Methodologies and Critical Race Methodology, insofar as these approaches have developed methodologies very close to the principles of Critical Theory.

This chapter is targeting undergraduate students, but also post-graduate students and early career researchers who are disappointed in mainstream research methods and their apparent disregard for the emancipatory potentials of social sciences. This chapter aims at explaining as simply as possible the tenets of Critical Theory and how these principles have been applied to empirical research. This chapter may be appealing to postgraduates and early career researchers who are cut out from big research grants, because Critical Theory offers effective tools to pursue an objective social inquiry that is content-led, rather than method-led. In this examination, Critical Theory is considered that of the ‘first generation’ of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, to be precise: Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), Friedrich Pollock (1894-1970), Leo Lowenthal (1900-1993) and Eric Fromm (1900-1980). The reason for privileging the first generation is double: firstly Habermas’ linguistic turn has lost its initial impulse and (*contra* Marrow, 1994) never really produced empirically-informed critical research (Best, Bonefeld, & O’Kane, 2018); secondly, several scholars are now referring to the ‘negative turn’ of Adorno as one of the main theoretical sources for critical projects and for renewing social analysis (Dinerstein et al., 2020; Holloway, Matamoros & Tischler, 2009).

To our knowledge, there is no systematic presentation of Critical Theory’s approach to empirical research. Marrow’s *Critical Theory and methodology* (1994) has Habermas’ as a reference point, rather than the ‘first generation’ of the Frankfurt School. The only systematic approach of this kind is in Benzer’s *The Sociology of Theodor Adorno* (2011), where there are two chapters on Adorno’s empirical studies and methodology. However, these represent philological studies, rather than an exposition of the kind attempted here.

The chapter explores the general approach to Critical Theory paying attention to the type of critique to mainstream social research that its proponents developed during a long period. Furthermore, connections between theory and practice are explored, in the sense that for the proponents of this approach the social content of research must have human dignity at its centre. In this section, the difference between method-led and content-led research will be discussed. Feminist Research Methodologies and Critical Race Methodology can be taken as instances of Critical Theory applied to empirical research; in that sense, these will be briefly presented. Examples of research carried out by proponents of these two approaches will be illustrated. Lastly, this chapter will examine how best to do critical research and will illustrate this with an in-depth example of Critical Theory’s empirical research.

By the end of this chapter, the reader should be able to understand the difference between Critical Theory and traditional theory and show knowledge of specific approaches, such as Critical Race Methodology or Feminist Research Methodologies, their positions within social science and their main principles. Furthermore, the reader will be able to demonstrate how a research project deals with the criteria of ‘objectivity’ in a critical way that develops a rigorous research project even though constrained

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