Critical social research: re-examining quality

Lee Harvey

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EDITORIAL

Critical social research: re-examining quality

Critical social research is a term encompassing an approach to social enquiry that attempts to go beneath surface appearance by critically engaging with prevailing conceptualisations of the social world. It is time for a more critical examination of the notion of quality in higher education. Far too much effort has been placed on describing systems, legitimating them, suggesting variants and, more recently, examining impacts. A lot of research on the quality of higher education involves relatively small-scale surveys on the one hand and in-depth interviews with selected respondents on the other. Fundamental social critical analysis is rare. It is time for more critical analysis and the journal seeks critical social research studies of higher education.

Critical social research has a long and sustained tradition in social science and is found in the work of Marx (Marx, [1887] 1977) and subsequent Marxists, feminists, anti-racists, structuralists, film theorists and post-colonialists. Critical social research is distinct from two other methodological 'traditions': positivism and phenomenology. Positivism is primarily concerned with causal explanation and phenomenology with interpreting the meaning of social processes and actions. Critical social research does not set out to establish causal or pseudo-causal relationships between operationalised concepts, nor to construct 'grand theoretical' edifices, nor does it attempt close analysis of symbolic processes.

The following represents an explication of the nature of such research first published in *Critical Social Research* (Harvey, [1990] 2022; see also Harvey and MacDonald, 1993; Harvey, 2012–2022a, 2012–2022b). Critical social research is informed by critical epistemology, a view that knowledge develops through critique and is constrained by history and structure. Sociological understanding is thus more than determining causes or interpreting meanings but requires locating events in a wider historical and social setting.

Muncie (2006) stated that

> critical social research attempts to reveal the socio-historical specificity of knowledge and to shed light on how particular knowledges reproduce structural relations of inequality and oppression. Critical social research, in the sense of offering critiques of social order, has a long history encompassing the likes of Aristotle, Socrates, Hobbes and Marx.

Critical social research should not be confused with Critical Theory, the latter is an example of the former but critical social theory is much wider. Critical social research refers to research practices that are intrinsically critical. This means that knowledge is seen to be dynamic and developed through critique. More than that, however, critical social research does not take the apparent social structure, social processes or accepted history for granted. It tries to dig beneath the surface of appearances.

It asks how social systems really work, how ideology or history conceals the processes that oppress and control people.

For example, to understand the development of quality assurance in higher education, it is necessary to do more than look for causes or to explore the meanings of those who engage with assurance processes. It is necessary to dig beneath the notion of quality and how it relates to assurance, the history of its genesis and evolution, how it fits into the broader socio-economic structure that enables higher education including government policy, legal constraints, links to business, media campaigns and to question the taken-for-granteds and ideological encumbrances and build an alternative understanding of quality assurance in the higher education realm.

What is involved is a process of deconstructing a dominant understanding and reconstructing an alternative understanding that lays bare the social and historical interrelationships. The elements of critical social research methodology are not simple building blocks that can be built up into a solution, much less ingredients in a pre-defined recipe for action. They are interlinked elements that orientate critical enquiry and are drawn together through the process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

Critical social research is not a mere theoretical exercise but involves a dialectical process grounded in empirical evidence. Critical social research is not a prescriptive practice, it is a way of approaching the empirical world that necessitates addressing the interrelationship between data, theory, epistemological presuppositions and socio-political context. To do critical social research requires developing a critical way of thinking. There are no rules of practice nor simple methods to follow.

There is no prescribed method of collecting data: official statistics, surveys, document analysis, media analysis, in-depth interviewing, participant and non-participant observation have all been used to different degrees in critical studies such as: Karl Marx (1887) *Das Kapital*, C. Wright Mills (1956) *The Power Elite*, Will Wright (1975) *Six Guns and Society*, Paul Willis (1977) *Learning to Labour*, Judith Williamson (1978) *Decoding Advertisements*, Sallie Westwood (1984) *All Day Everyday*, Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed (1987) *Women of Pakistan*, Mark Duffield (1988) *Black Radicalism and the Politics of De-industrialisation,* Philip Schlesinger *et al.* (1993) *Televising Terrorism*, Phil Scraton (2012) *Hillsborough,* Patrick Williams and Becky Clarke (2016) *Dangerous Associations*, Nicole Perlroth (2021) *This Is How They Tell Me the World Ends* and Rodrigo Finkelstein (2020) *Lost-Time Injury Rates*.

Critical social research examines social phenomena by directing attention at the fundamental nature of phenomena. Rather than take the abstract construction of the phenomena for granted, it takes apart (deconstructs) the abstraction to reveal the inner relations and thus reconstructs the abstract concept taking into account the social structural relations that inform it.

This process of deconstruction and reconstruction involves a totalistic approach. A totalistic approach denies the relevance of looking at one element of a complex social process in isolation and argues that the interrelationship of elements have to be examined, as well as how they relate to the social structure as a whole. So critical social research is concerned with the broad social and historical context in which phenomena are interrelated. It is concerned with revealing underlying social relations and showing how structural and ideological forms bear on them. Critical social research, then, is interested in substantive issues. It wants to show what is really going on at a societal level. Not only does it want to show what is happening, it is

also concerned with doing something about it. Critical social research includes an overt political struggle against oppressive social structures.

The elements of a critical social research approach are abstraction, totality, essence, praxis, ideology, structure and history, coming together in a newly reconstructed alternative understanding.

Abstraction

Abstraction is usually construed as the distillation of sensory perception of the world of objects into conceptual categories. That is, starting from the (literally) objective world, recurrent or apparently core or defining features are identified until an abstract concept is formulated. Thus, for example, 'employability' is construed as the set of 'skills' that enable a person to get a job. This process of distillation of some features from a set of observed objects is at the basis of most systems of classification.

Critical social research starts from the view that facts do not exist independently of their theoretical context. If facts are not self-evident then concepts cannot be abstracted from them. Critical social research thus works by moving from the abstract to the concrete. It starts with the abstract generalisation and investigates them in a broader context. For example, aggressive behaviour in the home in which a husband pushes, hits or throws things at his wife is encapsulated by the term 'domestic violence'. Critical social research goes beyond the surface appearance of domestic violence as a set of aggressive acts and reconceptualises it as, for example, an outcome of a patriarchal control. Abstraction, for critical social research, is more than specifying the concrete components, it requires identifying underlying structures, which have been assimilated uncritically into the concept, with the aim of developing a reconstructed concept.

Abstraction in critical social research, therefore, differs from the positivist use because, rather than simply providing the basis for ordering appearances and ultimately reifying them, they are used to get beneath the surface of appearances.

Totality

Critical social research embodies a totalistic approach. Totality refers to the notion that social phenomena are interrelated and that phenomena should not be analysed in isolation. They are part of a coherent structure which has a history. Phenomena have meaning only in relation to the structure. The structure, in turn, depends on the component parts. A simple analogy is language. A single word is a meaningless utterance or symbol taken outside the context of the structure, grammar and vocabulary of the language. The meaning of a word comes from its relations to other words. It is a meaning that also evolves over time. Understanding of a single word requires setting the word in the structure of the language and specific context of its use at a period of time. In adopting a totalistic approach, critical social research relates empirical detail to a structural and historical whole.

Domestic violence is not a set of isolated aggressive acts but the manifestation of an historical relationship in which wives were chattels 'owned' by their husband and where violence continues to be the ultimate expression of power within the family. The tolerance afforded domestic violence, because it occurs in the 'privacy of the home', is part of the wider structure of control of women by men that allows, for example, intimidation of women through the threat of rape and assault if they go out alone at night.

Essence

Critical social research is concerned with the essential nature of social phenomena. Essence refers to the fundamental element of an analytic process. Unlike positivists who regard any concern with 'essences' as metaphysical, and phenomenologists who seek the essential nature of social processes as an end in themselves, critical social research uses essence as a pivotal concept. Essence is the analytic element that is the key to unlocking the deconstructive process. Marx used the 'commodity form' as a core element in his analysis and critique of capitalist relations of production. The essential nature of domestic violence, for example, is not the range of aggressive acts but its functioning within the exploitative relationship of the family unit and as part of the social control of women. Identifying the essence is not the goal but a step on the way to building an alternative understanding.

Praxis

Critical social research is motivated by effecting change. For the critical social researcher knowledge is not just about finding out about the world but it is about changing it. It is important, therefore, that critical social research engages praxis. Praxis means practical reflective activity. It is what humans do a lot of the time. (Praxis does not include 'mechanical' activity like sleeping, breathing, walking, or undertaking repetitive work tasks.) Praxis is what changes the world.

For critical social research, knowledge is dynamic, not because it leads to the discovery of more bits of knowledge but because of a process of fundamental reconception that is only possible as a result of direct engagement with the processes and structures that generate knowledge. Reconceptualising domestic violence as a structural manifestation of the control of women by men shifts the emphasis from the exploration, of say, the cause of a specific incidence of domestic violence to a political issue of power and control. In undertaking such an analysis, critical social research fundamentally questions the legitimacy of the familial relationship and the sanctity of 'privacy'. Critical social research is not afraid of affecting 'research subjects' by raising consciousness and awareness—in short by empowering them.

Ideology

Ideology is an important concept for critical social research because it serves to obscure the nature of social relations and power structures. Ideology is an extensively debated and variously defined notion, often ignored, especially by positivists who cannot 'objectivise' it. However, the key aspect of ideology from the perspective of critical social research is that ideology reflects a dominant (or hegemonic) world-view that serves to legitimate the interests of dominant groups. Ideology is not simply a procedure by which reality is distorted but one in which ideology is dialectically related to the nature of social relations and serves not to distort or hide that relationship but to reify class differences as intrinsic and natural. Ideology is reaffirmed through everyday practice and so can only be changed through praxis. Transcending ideology is, thus, not just about identifying the ideological nature of social phenomena and addressing it through consciousness raising but requires deconstructing social relations and reconstructing alternatives. Seeing domestic violence as

isolated acts of aggression reflects a patriarchal ideology that obscures the structural oppression of women.

Structure

Social structure is a key concern of critical social research. Structure refers to the holistic notion of a complex and interdependent set of interrelated elements and that the elements can only be fully understood in the context of the structure of which they are part. (This is distinct from structural functionalists' notions of system). Structures are dynamic unlike reductionists systems that are congealed sets of interrelationships. A structure embodies a dialectical relationship of part and whole, where the meaning of the totality is dependent on the parts, which themselves only have meaning in relation to the whole.

To break domestic violence down into a system of male demands and consequent violence ignores the relationship between the elements and the whole, which is one of a transforming social relation. The controlling actions labelled 'domestic violence' can only be seen when the violence is related to the family unit and the domestic unit is related to the broader economic unit. To see domestic violence as individual acts (however systematic) denies this structural relationship.

Structure alone is not an adequate contextualisation for critical social research, which also situates social phenomena historically.

History

History refers to both the past and the process of constructing the past. For critical social research, reconstructing history is not just a matter of digging through archives or libraries to locate the facts and events of history. Reconstructing history is the result of an active interpretation of the available archaeological, documentary or oral evidence. Critical social research adopts a view of history as an interpretive process rather than the gathering of already existing facts.

To get beneath the surface of history requires a critique of the structural forms that guide current perceptions. So, the reconstruction of history takes place alongside a structural analysis. The critical approach to history locates events in their social and political contexts, addresses the economic constraints and engages taken-for-granted ideology. It does this not just by reference to the events but also requires the researcher to be reflexive, taking into account their own historical situation and perspective. A critical study of domestic violence, for example, would address the historical evolution of a husband's perceived 'rights' over his wife and explore changes that external structural influences have on family relations.

Deconstruction and reconstruction

What these elements are building towards is a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of an alternative understanding of substantive social processes. Abstraction and essence get to the core of the issue, totality and ideology critique contextualises while historical and structural analysis situates it and praxis drives the reconceptualisation.

Deconstruction and reconstruction begins from the abstract concepts that are applied to, or used in relation to, an area of investigation. In practice, there may be a large list of concepts. They are all interrelated and so the 'key' is to locate a central concept and critically analyse that. From that, the other concepts can be reconstructed.

Note, though, that critical social research is *not* embodied in a series of discrete phases. It is not just abstract concept analysis followed by hypothesis generation, data collection, data analysis, and the generation of results, with the implications for theory added at the end. Critical social research develops the different elements in parallel, each aspect informs each of the other aspects.

So, the abstract analysis, while the starting point, is integrally related to empirical enquiry, not something that stands apart from it. Conceptualisation, for the critical social researcher, is grounded in the material world. It is linked to practice. The deconstructive-reconstructive process, which is at the heart of dialectical analysis, involves a constant shuttling backwards and forwards in the mind of the researcher between abstract concept and concrete data; between social totalities and particular phenomena; between current structures and historical development; between surface appearance and essence; between reflection and practice. This works as follows.

The researcher is concerned with a realm of enquiry, usually provoked by a particular question that demands attention, such as: why do some youngsters not make the most of the opportunity offered by the education system? Does the mass media manipulate the viewer? Should women get paid for housework? Has quality assurance stifled creativity? These questions frame an area of enquiry. The first job is to explore its central concepts. The selection of a central concept is not simple and may involve false starts.

The whole point of critical research is that the researcher is prepared to abandon lines of thought that are not getting beneath surface appearances. It involves a constant questioning of the perspective and analysis that the researcher is building up. It is a process of gradually, and critically, coming to know through constant reconceptualisation. The 'correct' core concept only emerges in the course of the ongoing analysis. It is only 'correct' in the sense that it provides, at any point in the critical analysis, the best focus for deconstructing and reconstructing the phenomenon in its socio-historic context. Marx, for example, didn't start out with the notion of 'commodification' as his core construct in analysing capitalism. The shuttling back and forth between the abstract and concrete, the unit and the structure, ensures a dynamic deconstructive process. The first round of analysis may need to be further deconstructed because the reconstructed system may not appear to work or to make sense. Thus, the deconstruction needs to be further developed, which in turn will lead to a new basis for a reconstruction. So the process goes on until the reconstructed analysis is coherent.

It is not the collection of data that is important, nor the garnering of information or facts, nor the interpretation of specific actions. All of these contribute but critical social research is about a fundamental understanding; about getting beyond the 'facts' and 'hypotheses' to a deep understanding of a substantive issue.

Inter alia, the process involves exploring to what extent there is a disjunction between the underlying presuppositions of the abstract concept and the nature of concrete reality? This involves widening the framework of the concrete investigation to consider related aspects. This contrasts with conventional social research, which encourages the funnelling of attention towards the examination of narrowly

construed hypotheses. In 'good' conventional research this follows a wide acquaintance with available research and theoretical debate. Yet, it still focuses attention on specifics. Such an approach hinders the digging beneath the surface that is fundamental to critical social research.

The critical research process is ongoing, the new conceptualisations are used to reconstruct an alternative perspective. Thus, slowly, the ideology embedded in prevailing conceptualisations is undermined. The core abstraction is related to the social totality to see if it reveals further the nature of the workings of the totality. Empirical data is used to elaborate the relationship and suggest further deconstructive stages. The nature and manifestations of ideology are continually revealed. A new and radically different conceptualisation of the social processes and structural relations emerges. For critical methodologists then, science as the basis for the understanding of the social world, is not the construction of causal laws, but of a deeper understanding that goes beyond surface appearance and relates the parts to the whole. Relativity wasn't a thesis resulting from cause-and-effect experiments. Priestly's discovery of oxygen didn't lead to the conceptualisation of oxidisation. The mysterious world of particle physics can only be understood holistically. As such critical social research differs, too, from phenomenological approaches in relating its essentialist analysis to the social totality rather than immersing oneself in describing essences.

Throughout the description of this process the concentration has been on the processes of analysis and critique that enable the deconstruction and reconstruction of the realm of enquiry. There has been no concern with data collection procedures. It is not the manner of data collection it is the approach to evidence that is important. However, it is not adequate to indulge in 'armchair' speculation. The world of concrete practical activity has to be engaged.

To sum up, the dialectical deconstructive-reconstructive process can be construed as a process of focusing on the structural totality or historical moment and critically reflecting on its essential nature. The totality is taken initially as an existent whole. This structure presents itself as natural, as the result of historical progress, that is, it is ideologically constituted. The critical analysis of the historically specific structure must therefore go beyond the surface appearances and lay bare the essential nature of the relationships that are embedded in the structure. This critique ostensively begins by fixing on the fundamental unit of the structural relationships and decomposing it. The fundamental unit must be broken down until its essential nature is revealed, the structure is then reconstituted in relation to this essentialised construct. The reconstructive process reveals the transparency of ideology. The whole is grounded in historically specific material reality.

In short critical social results in an alternative understanding of substantive social processes.

It does it by deconstructing (not demolishing) current perceptions then reconstructing an alternative understanding. Abstraction and essence provide clues as to what is really at the heart of the issue. Totality and ideology provide a reminder of the inter-relatedness of social phenomena and their distortion in social discourse. Praxis reaffirms that knowledge is practical and changed by practical action—critical social results is overtly political. Structure and history provide the context within which understanding is built.

This journal would welcome contribution that adopt a critical social research perspective.

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Lee Harvey