# CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH
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# PART 1 BASICS

## 1.1 Introduction

This book is an illustrative guide to doing critical social research. It is not concerned with simply describing techniques of data collection that may be pertinent to a critical approach. Rather, through the exploration of a large number of case studies of critical social research it sets out and then explores the nature of critical social research *methodology*.

Methodology is viewed as the interface between methodic practice, substantive theory and epistemological underpinnings. Epistemology is used here to refer to the presuppositions about the nature of knowledge and of science that inform practical enquiry. Critical social research is underpinned by a critical-dialectical perspective that attempts to dig beneath the surface of historically specific, oppressive, social structures.

A critical approach is contrasted with positivistic concerns to discover the factors that cause observed phenomena or to build grand theoretical edifices, and with phenomenological attempts to interpret the meanings of social actors or attempt close analysis of symbolic processes.

Method refers to the way empirical data is collected and ranges from asking questions, through reading documents, to observation of both controlled and uncontrolled situations. While some methods lend themselves more readily to certain epistemological perspectives, no method of data collection is inherently positivist, phenomenological or critical.

Substantive theory refers to a set of propositions that offer a coherent account of aspects of the social world. These may be attempts to interpret, explain or understand phenomena, behaviour, events or practices. Again, such sets of propositions may suggest a preferred method or may imply an underlying epistemology but they do not prefigure it.

Methodology is thus the point at which method, theory and epistemology coalesce in an overt way in the process of directly investigating specific instances within the social world. Methodology, in grounding enquiry in empirical instances, thus makes explicit the presuppositions that inform the knowledge that is generated by the enquiry. This book is about the methodology appropriate to a critical-dialectical analysis of the social world.

There is no simple methodic recipe for doing critical social research. One must come to grips with the methodology. This is also true for phenomenological and positivistic approaches to social research although this is frequently ignored in the case of the latter where our 'common-sense' presuppositions about the nature of the 'scientific method' are substituted for an understanding of positivistic underpinnings. In such cases, methodology becomes transmuted into method. So familiar is this device that to actively disengage method from methodology seems both difficult and laborious. However, in order to understand a major tradition of social research, and ultimately to be able to carry it out, it is essential that the effort be made to disentangle the assumptions of substantive theory from methodic practices and from epistemological presuppositions. Only then is it possible to fully grasp the nature, implications and impact of critical social research. This book,

through its analysis of copious case studies attempts to generate this understanding in relation to specific realms of social enquiry.

At the heart of critical social research is the idea that knowledge is structured by existing sets of social relations. The aim of a critical methodology is to provide knowledge that engages the prevailing social structures. These social structures are seen by critical researchers, in one way or another, as oppressive structures. This book is divided into three sections each addressing a different form of oppression, those based on class, gender and race.

The analysis of oppression in sociological literature has been dominated, until recently, by class oppression. There is a vast amount of material in general on the nature and functioning of class in societies of all kinds. More specifically, critical social research has a long history linked to class-based analyses of oppression. Many of the approaches to critical social research are grounded in class analyses and the balance of the book reflects this long tradition.

Approaches that consider gender as the central oppressive mechanism are much more recent. Despite notable precursors, gender-based analyses of oppression burgeoned with development of the women's movement of the sixties but only became an established form of sociological enquiry with the development of feminism in the 1970s. A similar picture emerges in the case of race oppression. Again there is a long, but relatively hidden history, and again the explosion in analyses of race oppression have taken place in the context of the development of racial equality, black rights, black power and anti-apartheid movements. As with feminist perspectives, black perspectives have been incorporated into sociology only very recently. In both areas, the development of critical social research leans heavily, although not exclusively, on adaptations of earlier class-based methodologies. However, critical social research grounded in both gender and race oppression offer unique perspectives on critical analyses.

Of course, oppression occurs in other forms. Linked to race oppression is imperialism and colonial oppression. Within nation states, national and religious oppression also occurs. While sociological analysis has tended to concentrate on class, race and gender, there is a significant body of work that addresses age, disability and sexuality as oppressive mechanisms. The latter has been a consistent concern of a number of sociologists since the 1970s who have attempted, despite considerable official disinterest and public hostility, to reveal and analyse the nature of heterosexual oppression.

Space considerations prohibit the specific exploration of oppressive mechanisms other than the general categories of race, class and gender. This book does not intend a comprehensive review of non-dominant perspectives. The aim of the book is to provide a text that indicates what is involved in doing critical social research and it draws upon published critical social research studies for illustration

## 1.2 Criticism and knowledge

To distinguish *critical* social research from other forms of research practice may, at first sight, seem to be creating an artificial distinction. For what research process does not embody some notion of criticism? A critical facility is, at least in theory, as important as an analytic facility when undertaking research. This is undeniable. The difference between critical approaches and non-critical approaches is not the difference between the presence and absence of critique, rather it is the difference between approaches in which critique is an *integral* part of the process and those in which it is peripheral.

Critical social research involves an epistemological perspective in which knowledge and critique are intertwined. Indeed, it is arguable that for a critical methodologist, *knowledge is critique*. A critical research process involves more than merely appending critique to an accumulation of 'fact' or 'theory' gathered via some mechanical process, rather it denies the (literally) objective status of knowledge and concerns itself with the processural nature of knowledge. Knowledge is a dynamic process not a static entity. Knowledge is not a bucket into which grains of information are dropped in the hope that they somehow coalesce into some kind of explanation of the world. For critical methodologists, knowledge is a process of moving towards an understanding of the world and of the knowledge that structures our perceptions of that world. Critical social research thus aims at an analysis of social processes, delving beneath ostensive and dominant conceptual frames, in order to reveal the underlying practices, their historical specificity and structural manifestations.

Christine Delphy's (1978) analysis of housework provides an illustrative example of this process of moving towards an understanding of a social process that is concealed in a taken-for-granted category. Delphy argues that housework is rarely defined and its character is assumed usually in relation to the specific tasks undertaken in the home by the wife such as cooking, ironing and cleaning. Delphy argues that this empirical definition reflects the theoretical interpretations applied to housework. Her intention is to begin with those universally agreed elements of the concept of housework, that it is work and that it is unpaid, and to determine its structural nature. She chooses the complex example of the wife working on an agricultural smallholding, a considerable proportion of the product of which is for self-consumption. This example is taken because it highlights the problem of differentiating the so-called economic accountable production and non-accountable production aspects of a wife's work in such settings.

Delphy regards as fatuous the argument that housework is free because, not passing through the market, it is not regarded as productive. National product accounting includes self-consumed production that does not pass through the market, such as some of the work done on small-holdings. This accounting is reasonable as national accounting includes all work that increases wealth. However, only some of this work is included. Certain transformations that take place on farms are included others are not. Butchering a pig for self-consumption is included, cooking it is not. The latter is regarded as 'housework' and is excluded. It is also excluded from national accounting when done in all other households as well. So why is some 'unpaid' work included in national accounting and other 'unpaid' work excluded?

There are, Delphy argues, no conceptual definitions of 'occupational' work and 'housework'. They are empirical categories. Housework is what is left when occupational work is subtracted, or vice versa. In the case of French national accounting, when dealing with smallholdings, there is no definition of 'occupational work' nor of the 'holding', as it is neither a place distinguishable from the home nor a business producing exclusively for the market. Empirically, 'occupational' work on a farm is that which is distinct from what would be carried out in a non-agricultural household. Thus housework, empirically, is that which is work for self-consumption common to all households. So the definition of occupational work depends on housework being defined as a common package of tasks.

Delphy reminds us that payment and remuneration are not the same. Productive work done for oneself (housework or any other kind) should not be regarded as something that requires payment. It is its own payment. If the work was not done then payment would have to be made to some other person to perform if the product was required. So while the product of self-consumed work is legitimately added to the national account, as something of use value was produced even if it did

not acquire an exchange value by entering the market, it is not legitimate to expect payment for this work. To do so would be to pay for the work twice. The consumption is the remuneration.

So not all 'unpaid' work is *free* work. Baking and consuming ones own bread, for example, may be uneconomic in terms of time spent on the labour but it is still remunerated work, in real terms, therefore not free work. The only free work, or really unpaid work, is that which is unremunerated. That is, work which receives neither payment in exchange nor payment in the form of self-consumption. This must be work done for someone else.

Unremunerated work takes two forms. That which is included in national accounting as 'productive' and that which is not accounted. Housework is excluded from accounting because it is done within the confines of the home (or household unit) rather than economic productive unit. This has nothing to do with the services that make up housework, they all appear on the market in other contexts. Nor is it a function of the people who do the housework as women who provide services for free in their own home get paid when they do it in someone else's. It is the nature of the contract that ties the houseworker (wife) to the household (of her husband).

As far as national accounting goes, the household is the accounting unit. It is the household that enters into economic relations. There is no concern with what goes on inside the unit. As far as national accounting goes there are no individuals, only household units where nothing is exchanged or extorted from anyone. This clearly obviates the whole nature of the processes of work and exchange or non-exchange that take place within the household. Thus, argues Delphy, the analysis of housework cannot begin until the notion of household unit is overturned.

The significance of this is that housework cannot be properly viewed as a number of tasks or even a complete set of tasks. Seeing housework as a totality of tasks misleads; for housework must be seen as a particular *work relationship*. Delphy, therefore, defines it as 'all the work done unpaid for others within the confines of the household or the family' (Delphy, [1978] 1984, p. 90). Thus, there is no difference between the 'housework' and the other work done by wives, or other unpaid family members, whether it be in the homes of small farmers, businessmen, artisans, or wage earners. That farmers' wives are unable to easily draw a distinction between the work they do for the 'household' and the work they do for the 'occupation' is not because of the similarity of the tasks but because they are performed within the same relations of production.

For Delphy, then, it is a contradiction to discuss the structural character of housework while defining it (implicitly) as a set of tasks. The empirical determination of the theoretical concept housework forecloses on the theoretical discourse and has, according to Delphy, severely limited the study of housework as a relation of production. Theoretical advances may be aided by thinking of it as domestic work, or better still, familial work, rather than housework, as the former better represent the *relationship* of production.

This example illustrates how critical social research takes an empty abstract concept (housework) and reconstructs it as a historically specific idea that has its relevance within a structure of social relations. The reconstructed concept thus goes beyond the particular and is the basis for a critical analysis that reveals the nature of the structural relationships (of patriarchal exploitation) hidden behind the empty abstract concept.

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. Critical social research is *intrinsically* critical. It assumes that a critical process informs knowledge. In its engagement with oppressive structures it questions the nature of prevailing knowledge and directs attention at the processes and institutions that legitimate knowledge. Critique of oppressive

structures involves a critique of the 'scientific' knowledge that sustain them and this is often a direct focus of attention for critical social research as, for example, in Marx's engagement with positivist political economy throughout *Capital* and Oakley's critique of the sexist nature of sociology in her *Sociology of Housework*.

This does not mean, however, that any research that deals with critical subjects or is critical of prevailing academic disciplines is necessarily critical social research. A straightforward ethnographic account of the formation and work of a feminist group, based on in-depth interviews with key participants, for example, would not of itself necessarily be critical. It is important that the account be located in a wider context that links the specific activities with a broader social structural and historical analysis of women's oppression.

Conversely, critical social research is an evolving process. As it engages dominant ideological constructs and presuppositions about the nature of knowledge it is necessarily dynamic in the evolution of its critique. So, what may be a radical critique at one moment may, in a later context, appear to be superficial. Critical social research has to be located in its social milieu. What Marx had to say about capitalism has to be put in its Victorian context. Oakley's analysis of housework has to be seen as part of the embryonic feminist perspective emerging out of the activism of the Women's Liberation Movement and Ladner's account of the socialisation of Black ghetto women contextualised as a Black Power engagement with Women's Liberation.[1] Whatever reservations one may have of this work it was all profoundly critical in its time, and even if critical social research in these fields became more 'sophisticated', these studies still offer a fundamental critique of oppressive social structures.

Essentially, critical social research asks substantive questions about existent social processes. For example, the substantive questions addressed in the empirical work examined below include: what is the mechanism by which capitalists accumulate and legitimate their wealth? Who runs America? Why do working class kids get working class jobs? What role does Islam play in restricting women in Pakistan? To what extent does the legal system structure the role of the police? What is the link between women's seclusion and the caste and class system in India? Such questions cannot avoid political issues as they address historically specific sets of social relations.

## 1.3 Empirical study

Despite its long history and concern with material reality critical analysis of society has tended to be dominated by theoretical treatises. Empirical material is often taken-for-granted or even regarded as an encumbrance to the abstract theoretical analysis. There are, one suspects, a considerable number of critical commentators who regard empirical material with suspicion. The distancing of critical theorising from empirical material is understandable at one level. 'Facts' as descriptions of surface appearances are anathema to critical-dialectical thinking as they reify commonsense at the expense of deconstruction.

However, a theoretical analysis that fails to engage the material world through empirical material is itself limited. Such analysis is prone to detachment from historically specific social processes. It fails to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. At worst it is speculative. Since Marx, the tradition of critical sociology has rooted itself firmly in the 'here and now' and addressed details of the material reality directly. Marx was adamant that revealing the real state of affairs was dependent upon a thorough detailed analysis of actual social practices. Empirical analysis *together with* theoretical conjecture was essential for a dialectical analysis of inner connections.

Critical social research requires that empirical material is collected. It does not matter whether it is statistical material, anecdotes, directly observed behaviour, media content, interview responses, art works or anything else. Whatever provides insights is suitable.

However, empirical material must not be taken at face value. That does not mean that all data used must be subject to conventional 'reliability' or 'validity' checks. Data is meaningful only in relation to its theoretical context; reliability and validity are functions of the context and the epistemological presuppositions that the researcher brings to the enquiry. So for critical social research, data is important in order to ground the enquiry but data must not be treated as independent of their socio-historic context.

The concern of this book, then, is not with the adequacy of theoretical conjecture but with showing how empirical critical social research can be undertaken. The intention is not just to reassert the need for empirical critical enquiry but to show how it can be done without the data swamping the dialectical analysis.

Although this book is about doing critical social research this does not mean that it offers a set of methodic prescriptions. Critical social research is a way of approaching the social world in which critique is central. It is not bounded by a specific set of methods. Any methodic tool is permissible, it is the way the empirical evidence is approached and interpreted, the methodology not the method of data collection *per se*, that characterises critical social research. Critical social research encourages neither methodic monopoly, nor, more importantly, method-led research. Prescribing in advance how to collect data inhibits the research endeavour (Mills, 1959). Any combination of methods is acceptable to critical social research. Similarly, critical social research is not bounded by a single (grand) theoretical perspective. It is not (a version of) Marxism, or feminism, or anything else, for that matter.

This book, then, is not about what method or what 'ism' should be adopted for critical social research. Nor does it engage in internecine disputes about the 'best' form of critical research. It is not a treatise on critical thinking, nor a theoretical debate about the nature of sociology, nor a critique of other styles of research. The book is about how data has been obtained and how it has been used to critically address a substantive area of study and is organised around the themes of race, gender and class. While not the only basis for structural critique, the issues of class, gender and race have been the principle foci for critical social research.

The illustrative studies provide examples of the different perspectives in practice and show how an epistemological perspective has been fused with an approach to empirical data to provide a methodology designed to engage substantive questions. The illustrative studies are designed to show how the data collection and interpretation are intrinsically linked to epistemological concerns about the nature of oppression and the development of knowledge. It is not the intention of the book to critique the theory or substantive findings of the studies. The intention is to show how different authors have adopted different critical ways of working.

## 1.4 Critical and conventional ethnography

Critical social research is a way of approaching the world. It involves locating methodic concerns within an epistemological framework. In order to illustrate the difference in principle between critical and non-critical ways of working this section will briefly review the differing approaches to ethnographic work adopted by critical and conventional practitioners. [2]

*1.4.1 Conventional approaches to ethnography*

Ethnography,[3] in one form or another, has been an important method throughout the short history of institutionalised sociology. Current forms of conventional practice are derived from the codification of the American experience since 1900 (Harvey, 1987), most of which had been brought together in three widely referenced readers published at the end of the 1960s, McCall and Simmons (1969), Filstead (1970) and Denzin (1970a). The accumulated and conventional wisdom of these collections was that participant observation, while not 'objective' in the sense used in discussing the reliability and validity of the social survey, was a set of methods directed towards an unbiased and accurate 'analytic description of a complex social organization' (McCall & Simmons, 1969, p. 3)

This approach sees ethnography as a method that used prevailing theoretical concepts and propositions to guide the analysis through a systematic collection, classification and reporting of 'facts' in order to generate new empirical generalisations based on these data. As such, this inductive approach sees analytic description as primarily an empirical application and modification of theory. Only secondarily is ethnography able to test theory, and this is limited to a comparison of complex analytic descriptions of single cases as and when such cases are accumulated. Detailed empirical description to reveal social processes rather than causal generalisation is how the conventional approach projects ethnography.

However, for many ethnographers the strength of the approach is the insights it provides of social phenomena in their natural setting. For some, this is recast in phenomenological terms and ethnography has increasingly tended to be used as a procedure for gaining an understanding of social settings from the subjects' point of view. Immersion in a field of study allows the ethnographer to gain an understanding of the processes operating in the subject group, institution or community. Thus, the emphasis for most ethnography is usually on forms of social interaction and the meanings that lie behind these.

None the less, ethnography, whether seeking subject's meanings or settling for detailed analytic description has conventionally been characterised by microscopic studies[4] and an explicit concern with validity and reliability. The exemplary method of ethnography, participant observation, has been particularly susceptible to criticism of its subjectivism and unverifiability.[5] Participant observation, while receptive to subjects' conceptions and useful in constructing an understanding of a social setting must nonetheless strive for 'validity', according to conventional accounts. In order to obtain an accurate and reasonably complete and valid description it is necessary for researchers to employ participant observation techniques 'systematically, comprehensively and rigorously', that is, with 'adequate safeguards against the many potentially invalidating or contaminatory factors which threaten to diminish the interpretability of the resulting data'. (McCall & Simmons, 1969, p. 77). Contaminating factors are the 'reactive effects' of the observer's presence or activities on the phenomena being observed; the 'distorting effects of selective perception and interpretation on the observer's part'; as well as the inability of the observer to witness all aspects of a given phenomenon.

It is crucial, according to the accumulated wisdom (Miller, 1952; Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955; Vidich, 1955) for the participant observer to maintain a balanced perspective. The researcher should be 'hypersenstive' to the various manifestations of 'threats to interpretability' in order that steps may be taken to reduce 'contamination' through the 'modification of the observer's role *vis à vis* his [sic] subjects' (McCall & Simmons, 1969, p. 104), for example, avoiding becoming too closely identified with one faction in the organisation or group being studied. Alternatively, direct 'respondent interviewing of a suitably drawn sample' can be used to check out the impressions of

direct observation thereby exposing 'systematic bias' in order that previous interpretation of the motives and meanings of the participants can be tempered or revised. The conventional approach to ethnography emphasises detachment, enabled by researchers' reflexive accounts of their role. This is crucial for an 'objective', systematic and valid analysis of a social setting.[6]

The scientistic rigours of the conventional approach have been mediated, to some extent, in more recent developments of ethnography. The current tendency is to see ethnographic work as providing detailed information on what people do and insights into what they think they are doing and why they are doing it. Watching what people do is useful as it provides a certain amount of direct data. However, like any other data, this only has meaning if put in some kind of context. If the researcher adopts an outsider view the data makes sense only in relation to the researcher's frame of reference. This leads to the imposition of some external explanation onto the practices that operate within the group under study. In short, the researcher has a view of social actions that do not make the same sense to him or her as they do to the people in the social group. Ethnography, thus goes one stage further and attempts to illicit the sense of the group. The researcher is required to become acquainted with meanings the actions have for the members of the group. The researcher, in one way or another, is expected to access members own self-accounting. Ethnography tries to generate an understanding of the group from their point of view.

This process of accessing members' meanings may be by co-existing with the group, that is, participating in one way or another and gradually assimilating the perspective. Or it might be 'short-circuited' to some extent, by asking questions. Such questioning is not of the scheduled interview type. It is designed to allow respondents to develop their own frames of reference, not the interviewer's. The idea is to get respondents to talk about how they see their world, so any device, ranging from an impromptu, *in-situ* chat through to semi-structured interviews, may be a suitable vehicle. Unfortunately, the respondents will not simply reveal sets of group meanings. This is not because they are trying to hide them but because they are unaware of the abstract frames of reference or meaning of the social processes that operate in the group. [7]

Reflexivity is nowadays regarded as central to ethnographic research. This involves two things. First, it requires that researchers reflect upon the research process in order to assess the effect of their presence and their research techniques on the nature and extent of the data collected. Crudely put, researchers must consider to what extent respondents were telling them what they wanted to hear; did the researcher(s) inhibit respondents; did the format of the data collection restrict the kind of data being collected, and so on? Second, ethnographic reflexivity requires that researchers critically reflect upon the theoretical structures they have drawn out of their ethnographic analysis. In effect, researchers are expected to think laterally by reconceptualising their evidence using other possible models. Ethnographers should not just fit details into a preformed schema but try to reform the schema to see if the details have different meanings.

None of this is easy, but it is particularly difficult where interviews are 'one-offs'. The more contact one has the more likely one is to be able to dig deeper. However, a great deal of contact can also lead one to start taking the group perspective for granted and to lose track of the nature of group meanings. It is, therefore, important to record material of all types scrupulously, in as much detail, either at the time or as soon after, as is reasonably possible. Material received from subjects should be augmented by an ongoing journal of the researcher's own involvement, actions, and reflections upon the research situation and research process. Constant review of recorded material of all sorts helps reflexivity, theory development and understanding. Most ethnographers, especially those who place reflexivity at the heart of the ethnographic concern, would probably concur broadly with this conventional approach.

*1.4.2 Approaches and techniques of critical ethnography*
The critical approach to ethnographic analysis is somewhat different. Critical ethnography is a particular approach to ethnography that attempts to link the detailed analysis of ethnography to wider social structures and systems of power relationships in order to get beneath the surface of oppressive structural relationships.[8]

There are, broadly speaking, three ways in which this is done. The first is to consider the subject group in a wider context. This is the weakest form of critical ethnography and may not strictly be critical if, for example, the contextualisation merely takes the form of analysing functional relationships between the subject group and the wider social milieu. The second is to focus on the wider structural relations and examine the ways in which the social processes that are evident in the subject group are mediated by structural relations. The third is to incorporate ethnography directly into a dialectical analysis. In this approach, the understanding developed from the ethnographic study is integrally related to the deconstruction of the social structures. Ethnographic techniques are thus used to elaborate an understanding that goes beyond surface appearance and thereby specifies the nature of the essential relationship of the structure under analysis. In the first two approaches to critical ethnography there is a tendency to explore a group and then situate it. In the third, the tendency is to begin with the structural relationships and then undertake an ethnographic enquiry in order to facilitate structural analysis, as Willis does in *Learning to Labour* (see section 3.6).

All the approaches to critical ethnography make use of the usual ethnographic data collection processes such as in-depth interviewing, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, participant and non-participant observation and tend to adopt reflexive ethnographic practices. What is important for critical ethnography, however, is that the probing of the subjects' meanings is not the end of the story. The group operates in a socio-historically specific milieu and are not independent of structural factors. Their meanings may appear to be group-centred but are mediated by structural concerns.

Digging deeper to illicit frames of reference also has political implications. Conventionally, the researcher-respondent relationship is hierarchically structured with the researcher directing the exchange and extracting information. The retention of control by the interviewer/researcher and the compliance of the respondent/subject is intended, conventionally, to ensure minimum contamination by the researcher, thus maintaining the validity of the research situation. This view is contrary to the aims of critical social research for several reasons. First, it subverts the critical process, presupposing the primacy of the researcher's frame of reference (even if it is subsequently shifted through reflexive accounts). Second, it presupposes a one-way flow of information that leaves the respondent in exactly the same position having shared knowledge and ignores the self-reflective process that the imparting of information involves. Third, the direct corollary of the self-reflection is the inevitable engagement in dialogue where information is required or perspectives need to be discussed. The involvement of the researcher in this real dialogue[9] involves her/him in the critical process. Fourth, the critical ethnographic interview (in whatever its form) is not neutral but directs attention at oppressive social structures and informs both researcher and respondent. Thus digging down to reveal the respondent's frame of reference is not meant to be an oppressive hierarchical process but a liberating dialogical one. In that sense it is linked directly to the totalistic analysis.[10]

The role of the critical ethnographer is to keep alert to the structural factors whilst probing meanings. To explore, where possible, the contradictions between action and words; to see to what extent group processes are externally mediated; to investigate how the subjects see group norms

and practices constrained by external social factors; to see how prevailing ideologies are addressed; to analyse the extent to which subversive or resistant practices transcend prevailing ideological forms; and so on.

A major problem for ethnographers is the sorting, coding and organising of ethnographic material as ethnographic research invariably leads to the collection of an enormous amount of detailed accounts, quotes and examples. The production of a finished ethnographic report requires the generation of a framework (or 'angle') and a selection from the empirical data for illustrative purposes. The choice of material is guided by the theoretical framework that has emerged in the course of the study. For critical social research, the framework will be informed by the observed relationship of the group (being studied) to the oppressive structure.

The process of assimilating and reflecting on the data and the research process is the most difficult but also the most crucial part of the critical ethnographic process. There are no simple techniques for doing this as it is the shuttling between detailed material and the wider social milieu that is at the heart of the dialectically generated critique. The researcher has to get to know the data and to see it from a variety of different perspectives. Critical ethnography requires the location of interesting social microcosms in wider structural forms. It also requires that the understanding of these structural forms is mediated by the closely observed detail of social practices and the meanings they encompass.

One way this might be achieved is through multiple reading of data. In the first instance the data is read 'vertically' (usually chronologically) until the researcher is familiar with it. It should then be copied and segmented into different themes, with items carefully sourced and cross-referenced (this may require multiple copies of some parts). Some ethnographers refer to this as *pile building* because they literally cut up their material and arrange it, according to themes, in piles (on the floor) (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Weis, 1985). This can be done electronically using a range of software packages. The process of segmenting into themes is guided by recurrent ideas that occur in the data but also by the sets of structural relations that appear to bear on the field of study.

The identification of pertinent structural relations is not generated by the detailed inductive ethnographic work alone. It requires that, in parallel to it, the researcher undertake a broad exploration of the prevailing social, political and economic structure in which the detailed study is located. This may, and often does, involve an historical examination of structural changes to show how these have impinged upon the subjects of the ethnographic study.

Almost invariably the first segmentation will be but a rough approximation to the themes that ultimately guide the critical analysis. After the first segmentation the data is read horizontally, by theme, to assess the internal cohesiveness of the identified themes and the interrelationship between themes. The critical ethnographer thus seeks to reveal both contradictions and 'ideological mediations'. Contradictions occur in the disjunctions between people's words and actions and inconsistencies in expressed opinions or activities. Ideological mediations are reflected in the way stereotypes, myths, or dominant conceptualisations guide or legitimate respondent's actions and meanings.

The anomalies and ideological mediations thus revealed provide a way of re-examining the data and the dialectical relationships between social structure and detailed observation that are emerging from the analysis. Themes are re-construed, the data reorganised into new piles and re-read horizontally until the researcher has identified the underlying relationships that inform the observed social phenomena. This process of data segmentation and horizontal reading can be done during the fieldwork as well as after its completion but, almost always, requires that ethnographers withdraw from the field temporarily in order to examine the data and locate it in a wider structure.

Critical ethnography thus differs from conventional ethnography because it locates specific practices in a wider social structure in an attempt to dig beneath surface appearances. It addresses myths or contradictions as expressions of oppressive social structures. It is indifferent to 'value freedom' as does not consider it necessary for the researcher to be a neutral observer. Critical ethnography, however, is reflexive in its constant confrontation of taken-for-granteds.

## 1.5 The Critical Tradition

Critical social research is part of a long tradition of criticism of contemporary social order encompassing Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Saint-Simon and Marx [11] (Coser, 1988). It has subsequently been behind the endeavours of Marxists, neo-Marxists, pseudo-Marxists, social critics, structuralists, Marxist-structuralists, critical hermeneutists, feminists, black perspectives and radical social scientists of one sort or another ever since. It is all the more surprising, then, that, while it is simple enough to find accounts of the core processes of say positivistic or phenomenological approaches to sociological research, accounts of the essential nature of a critical approach are elusive. This book aims to fill this gap

Despite the long tradition, critical social research has waxed and waned in popularity over the last century and there have been numerous reassertions of the need for and principles of 'critical' social enquiry. In Europe, up to the 1960s, these have tended to be linked directly with reworkings of Marxism (see section 2.2 below). In the United States, the Marxist element has been less overt and the call for critical social research has tended to be more pragmatic, directed against bureaucratisation, institutionalised power and manipulation of mass society (Ross 1901; Thomas, 1917; Mannheim, 1940). This has been tied to the censuring of social science for failing to develop methodologies sufficiently imaginative to deal with these major substantive issues (Lynd, 1939, Mills, 1959).

The 1960s seemed to mark the full rehabilitation of critical social research with the debates revolving around Marxism leading up to and in the wake of the widespread student (and worker) revolts of 1968. A rehabilitation given new impetus by the development of Black movements and Women's movements with their calls for critical social analysis in which ethnic and gender oppression are brought into the foreground (see Parts 3 and 4 below).

However, the case for critical social research has continued to be made. Sometimes the plea is for a particular form of critical enquiry as in Zygmunt Bauman's (1976) *Towards A Critical Sociology* with its emphasis on an approach informed by Habermas' critical hermeneutics. At others it is a the re-expression of the responsibility of the social scientist to attempt to address substantive issues, as in Alfred McClung Lee's (1978) *Knowledge For Whom?* In all cases though, rather than assume the centrality of critical social research in the long tradition of social enquiry its place has to be reclaimed.

Bauman (1976), for example, criticises sociology for having far too long conceptualised society in 'nature-like' terms. From Comte, through Durkheim to Parsons and various other forms of functionalism society has been seen as 'second nature' and as organised organically. The emergence of existentialist- and phenomenologically-informed sociology, he argues, does nothing to challenge this preoccupation. On the contrary, by strengthening the key role of commonsense, such approaches deepen and strengthen the 'nature-like' perspective. They do this in particular by focusing on the way that common-sense is sustained and embedded in the routines and assumptions of everyday life. Herein 'resides the intrinsically conservative role of sociology as the science of unfreedom' (Bauman, 1976, p. 36).

The positivistic bent of sociological enquiry into 'things as they really are' must be engaged. Against the myth of uncommitted knowledge Bauman advocates a critical sociology aimed at human liberation. Critical sociology must challenge the 'very daily existence which renders commonsense so placidly, if not fatuously, assured of its righteousness'. Bauman proposes Habermas' thesis of emancipatory reason as a basis for critical sociology as it does not simply compete with other theories but 'recklessly denies the validity of information itself'. Information, it claims, is partial, historically specific, inconclusive and the 'reflection of a mutilated, maimed, truncated existence'. Emancipatory reason does not struggle with common-sense but with the social reality that underlies it. 'It is social reality itself which renders commonsensical awareness—even when resulting from faithful, correct [positivistic] reflection—false' (Bauman, 1976, p. 75).

Bauman's call for an overt reconsideration of the nature of critical social research reflects the European tradition of critical thought that is grounded in epistemological concerns. His is not just a call for critical social science but an attempt to locate it in a specific framework; in particular, it is a concern to disentangle critical-emancipatory social science from the phenomenological critique of positivism. The need to address this distinction is symptomatic of the variety of engagements of critical with non-critical epistemology to be found in European discourse. This has led to a number of different general perspectives on critical social research and thus to a number of overlapping meanings. In its 'narrowest' sense critical social research is conflated with 'a Marxist approach' or, somewhat more vaguely, a 'dialectical' orientation. Gouldner (1970) linked critical social research with 'radical sociology', while Radnitzky (1973) construed it as a 'hermeneutic-dialectic' approach opposed to 'logical empiricism'. In his widely read book, Benton (1977) proposed a materialist or Marxist theory of knowledge distinct from both positivism and humanism and Johnson *et al.* (1984) contrast substantialism with empiricism, subjectivism and rationalism as a basis for a critical dialectical approach.

The approach in the United States has tended to be more pragmatic. In *Sociology for Whom?* Alfred McClung Lee (1978) takes up the critique of American sociology voiced by Robert Lynd and C. Wright Mills (discussed in detail in Part 2).[12] He criticises sociology for failing to deal with the pressing issues of the day and sees sociology as impotent in the face of 'power brokers and manipulators', insidious 'invisible government' (Lippman, 1913) or 'plutocratic politics' controlled by wealth (Sumner, 1888). Lee addresses the extent to which modern sociology is able to help people control themselves and their resources for human ends and proposes a sociology in the service of humanity. He examines the ideals, practices and teaching of sociology and accuses much contemporary sociology of neo-scholasticism; the packaging of research conclusions in complex theories and jargons that obscure the main point. There is also, Lee contends, a tendency to fall back on methodological discussion to disguise inadequate or embarrassing research findings, to the extent of claiming the research as a test of the methodology. For him, social scientists are more concerned with their career prospects than the substance of their research and thus serve the *status quo* through their acceptance of the pressures of academic administration, the business and political establishment, publishers, and the providers of research monies.

Lee encourages a questioning attitude about the practice of contemporary sociology and the discarding of a narrow insular perspective. He suggests co-operative rather than competitive work; critique of the privileges, power and exploitation within the discipline; jettisoning of privileged texts ('holy writs', as he refers to them); a wide-ranging search for facts and ideas; and a critical examination of new fads, of both their theoretical and epistemological content and their wider social implications. Further, sociology should address a wider range of social problems than those that 'irritate the inhabitants of white suburban ghettos'; frame analysis in the context of worldwide

'colonialist and neo-colonialist exploitation'; and address and publicise the 'manipulative strategies and propagandas to which so much of our mass media, politics, religious apologetics, and formal education are devoted' (Lee, 1978, p. 222–223). In short, social scientists must serve 'all classes of people as citizens, as consumers, and as neighbors'. This must include studies of how people can 'protect themselves from undesirable manipulation by those in positions of power'. Humanist sociology must broaden its perspective and embrace other disciplines not retain strict lines of demarcation. Sociologists in the service of humanity 'act principally as critics, demystifiers, reporters, and clarifiers.' They critically review 'folk wisdom' and 'strip away some of the outworn clutter of fictions' that inform peoples' lives (Lee, 1978, p. 36).

A decade later, Lewis Coser (1988) felt it again necessary to impress upon the American Sociological Association the salience of the critical tradition and the need to resurrect it. He noted the perturbing influence on 'hopeful, critical undergraduates' in graduate school to relegate 'their critical impulses into half forgotten liminal layers of the mind'. Like Mills and Lee before him, he noted the tendency for sociological training in the United States to be directed at methodological refinement rather than critical thinking. 'The methodological tail wags the substantive dog' and in so doing they abandon the 'critical birthright' and 'fail to enhance the critical bite' of sociology. The resultant work is often dull and 'tedious as a laundry list'. In the United States, critical reflection on substantive issues is more likely to be found amongst natural than social scientists (Birnbaum, 1988) and the critical edge of sociology relies on imports: 'Habermas, Giddens, or Bourdieu serve as substitutes for missing native critical products' (Coser, 1988, pp. 4–5).

Coser reasserts the need for sociology to take up its responsibilities. Sociology that 'limits itself to taking account of what is', he argues, is inadequate. Critical sociological thought is needed 'in order to pinpoint and locate social problems and issues of which ordinary men and women are not yet aware'. Critical sociology needs to reveal the 'worm in the apple', the 'rot behind the glittering facade of the current scene'. For example, social disturbances, rather than being seen as aberrations, are addressed by critical sociologists as signs of 'deep-seated maladjustments in the social structure that can only be remedied through thorough reconstruction of basic societal premises'. Without critical sociology, he argues, 'the body of our discipline, and also the entire social fabric, are likely to congeal into frozen conformity' (Coser, 1988, pp. 9–12).

Todd Gitlin (1988), also at the American Sociological Association, similarly voiced his disappointment with lack of criticism in sociology. He offers a tentative explanation for this lack citing a hostile economic climate and the academic career structure of sociology, which have coincided with an insular, inaccessible sociology, unable or unwilling to take on board social criticism. This is epitomised by the growth of post-structuralism, which promises everything but requires no engagement in the polity. For him, the decline of social criticism is rooted in a much larger problem, the decline of a public at large, and in this he reflects Mills' and Lee's long held views about public manipulation and mass media. Social critics, he argues, must at the very least address this issue.

Although the idea of critical social research is embedded in the tradition of social enquiry it frequently needs to be unearthed and reasserted. No more so than at the start of the 1990s in the wake of the right's claiming of the high ground of moral and philosophical discourse. The left, world wide, confounded by the persuasiveness of consumerism was forfeiting its own analytic concepts and adopting, uncritically, the reactionary re-workings of the three R's: radicalism, realism and revolution. Critical social research must, as part of its responsibility to reveal the anti-democratic oppressions of the contemporary social world, reclaim these constructs.

This is not to assert any direct political affiliation for critical social research. It is a methodology not a political creed. However, it is a methodology that is informed by a view that social structures are, in various ways, oppressive mechanisms. Critical social research, in this book, refers, then, only to work that involves a critique of oppressive social structures. It is not restricted to Marxism nor any other 'ism'. However, only work that reflects a methodology that in some way attempts to get beneath the surface of appearances, in order to reveal the nature of oppressive mechanisms, is included. The next section explores in outline the elements of such a methodology.

## 1.6 Elements of Critical Social Research

### 1.6.1 Introduction

Critical social research is extremely varied but critical methodology is based on seven building blocks. These blocks should not be considered as discrete units that can simply be placed next to one another. They are elements that are drawn together in various ways in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction. These elements of critical social research are abstraction, totality, essence, praxis, ideology, history and structure.

Critical social research denies that its object of study is 'objective' social appearances. It regards the positivistic scientific method as unsatisfactory because it deals only with surface appearances. Instead, critical social research methodology cuts through surface appearance. It does so by locating social phenomena in their specific historical context. Historically-specific phenomena cannot be regarded as independent, on the contrary they are related to other phenomena within a prevailing social structure. Critical social research analyses this structure. Social structures are maintained through the exercise of political and economic power. Such power (grounded in repressive mechanisms) is legitimated through ideology. Critical social research thus addresses and analyses both the ostensive social structure and its ideological manifestations and processes.

In examining the context of social phenomena, critical social research directs attention at the fundamental nature of phenomena. Rather than take the abstract 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 and 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 examination of particular critical empirical studies that forms the bulk of this book is in order to illustrate how critical research has been undertaken in practice and how some or all of these elements have been combined in the dialectical deconstructive-reconstructive process. Before moving on to see how these elements have been developed in practice, a few working definitions of the building blocks of critical social research are perhaps in order.[13]

*1.6.2 Abstraction*

Abstraction is usually construed as the distillation of sensory perception of the world of objects into conceptual categories. That is, we start from the (literally) objective world and select out the recurrent or apparently core or defining features until an abstract concept is formulated (at least in our minds if not in a directly communicable form). This process of distillation of some features from a set of observed objects is at the basis of most systems of classification.

This process may be acceptable to phenomenalist approaches to knowledge, which involve an implicit assumption that science begins with factual observations and abstracts from them, but it is not adequate for critical social research. Indeed, the start point for critical social research is to reverse this normal process of abstractive thought.

Critical social research admits 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.

At one level this requires a thorough understanding of the way the concept or abstraction is usually used. Of course, any sound non-critical research will also undertake this kind of review. Indeed, it is embedded in the sociological tradition. Critical social research, however, goes further than a comprehensive review of accepted usages to investigate the taken-for-granted underpinnings of the concept. In this respect it differs from most non-critical research. Having understood how a concept is used, critical social research attempts to reveal underlying structures that specify the nature of the abstract concepts, but which have themselves been assimilated uncritically into the prevailing conceptualisation.

Delphy's analysis of the abstract concept of housework (section 1.2 above) provides an example. The abstract concept is made concrete not just as a set of tasks but also reveals underlying relations of production, which are obscured by the non-critical notion of housework. Delphy's analysis illustrates how critical social research aims to critically develop a reconstructed abstraction that represents the inner structures without which historically specific phenomenal form, or outward appearance, has no meaning. The general concept of housework is grasped in relation to the total structure of patriarchal relations in which it exists. Thereafter, the historically specific, in Delphy's case French smallholders, may be analysed in relation to the generalised form by examining the evolution and structuring of the concrete practical circumstances and processes by which some of the housewives' work is excluded from productive labour.

Critical methodology's use of abstractions, 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. Instead of simply adopting an empirical approach and logging housework tasks, a critical approach relates housework to the wider sphere of production and sees it as a work *relationship*. The penetration of this mode of productive relations begins to get beneath the surface of appearances. The superficial taken-for-granted 'task view' of housework is replaced by a dynamic conception that provides the basis for a holistic critique of social processes.

*1.6.3 Totality*

Totality refers to the view that social phenomena are interrelated and form a total whole. This implies more than that a social phenomenon should be situated in a wider social context, it requires that social phenomena should not be analysed in isolation. They should not be regarded as encapsulated by a narrowly defined realm that can be investigated in a way that suggests they are

self-contained elements or organisms. A totalistic perspective implies that the components are interrelated into a coherent structure, that they only have meaning in relation to the structure, and in turn the structure relies on the component parts. [14]

   In adopting a totalistic approach, critical social research attempts to relate empirical detail to a structural and historical whole. Crucial to a critical methodological approach to history and structure are three things. First, an appreciation that social relations are historically specific. Second, an appreciation of the structural relations operating within that historical moment. Third, an appreciation of the *reciprocal* nature of the determinancy of historically specific structure and specific phenomenal forms. So, returning to Delphy's example of housework, the French mid-twentieth-century housewife is seen as operating within a family unit whose internal exploitative relations are excluded from national accounting. The unremunerated (as opposed to unpaid) labour of the housewife both maintains the social and labour relationship of the family unit and is maintained by it.

## 1.6.4 Essence

Essence refers to the fundamental element of an analytic process. Most positivists regard any concern with essences as bordering on the metaphysical. Their only overt acknowledgement is in relation to the reduction of social or physical processes to their essential causal links. Phenomenologists, investigating the social world, view essences in a rather different way. They seek the essential nature of social phenomena or social relations. That is, some kind of core of being or engagement with a stream of consciousness, or, less transcendentally, the set of constructs that informs interactive processes. For critical social researchers, essence is a fundamental concept that can be used as the key to unlocking the deconstructive process. The key Marx used in his analysis of capitalism is (as we will see in more detail in section 2.3) the commodity form. For Delphy, the essential nature of housework was not the set of tasks, nor its lack of payment but its location within the exploitative relations of the family unit. Housework is essentially a work *relationship*. It is unremunerated work done by one member of a family unit *for* another.

## 1.6.5 Praxis

Praxis means practical reflective activity. It is what humans do a lot of the time. Praxis does not include 'instinctive' or 'mindless' activity like sleeping, breathing, walking, or undertaking repetitive work tasks. Praxis is what changes the world. 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. However, the critical social researcher is not interested in the specific actions or reasons for action of an individual. Individual actions are simply indicative of social groups operating within an oppressive social structure and/or historical juncture. What critical social research must take account of, in some way, is that changes in social formations are the result of praxis. So the subjects of any enquiry are analysed as to their potential for developing group action. Further, however, critical social researchers engage oppressive social structures and their own enquiries thus embody praxiological concerns.

   Throughout, it has been suggested that critical social research is as much about a questioning the nature of knowledge as it is about the critique of the knowledge we have. Knowledge changes not simply as a result of reflection but as a result of activity too. Knowledge changes as a result of praxis. Similarly what we know informs praxis. Knowledge is dynamic, not because we uncover more grains of sand for the bucket but because of a process of fundamental reconceptualisation which is only possible as a result of direct engagement with the processes and structures that

generate knowledge. Knowledge does not reside in a cupboard or on a bookshelf to be taken out, dusted down, and looked at. Knowledge exists in our everyday lives. We live our knowledge, it may inform what we do but we also constantly transform it through what we do. For critical social research this means that an analysis of oppressive social structures is in itself a political act. Knowing cannot be shelved, it becomes part of our life, and informs our actions that engage these structures. The activity of engagement is at the root of further development of knowledge. Critical social research is thus intrinsically praxiological. Thus, for example, Delphy argues that the analysis of housework cannot begin until the notion of household unit is overturned.

*1.6.6 Ideology*
'Ideology' has not been easily translated into English and has tended to be little or poorly analysed in much conventional social research. The difficulty in 'objectivising' ideology has led some social scientists to regard it as beyond scientific analysis and thus not important, or to replace it with terms like 'norm', 'values' and 'central value system'. The use of alternative terms has been a notable feature of American social science (Hall, 1978). These alternative concepts, while attempting to operationalise the idea of social legitimations, dispense with the critical element and are of little use in developing a critical analysis that goes beneath surface appearance.

Ideology, as a concept, has a long history but it developed its current usage as an analytic and critical tool in the work of Marx and has been an important feature of Marxism. Marx suggested that ideology is present from the moment that social relations take on a hierarchical form. There are, arguably, two approaches to a critical analysis of ideology, the *positive* and the *negative* view of ideology (Larrain, 1979, 1982).

Ideology in its positive sense tends to relate ideology closely to *Weltanschauung* (world view), notably class-based world views (as in Lukacs' (1971) thesis of working-class consciousness). The world view of the dominant class (the bourgeoisie in capitalism) prevails over other views and distorts perception through various mechanisms embodied in education, religion, the media and so on, in order to conceal the real nature of the relations of production underlying class differences. This dominant world view is said to be hegemonic. Ideology therefore serves to hide the interests of dominated groups from themselves. This view, thus, tends to equate ideology with false consciousness. The positive view of ideology renders enormous power to ideology, or to the manufacturers and dissipators of ideology. The positive view of ideology, while seeing ideology as distorting, tends to ignore the grounding of ideology in social relations. Ideology thus emerges as a seemingly self-evident abstraction. This approach, while supposedly materialist, inserts ideology as an idealist screen between social milieu and knowledge production.

The negative meaning of ideology is fundamentally opposed to a reduction of ideology to false consciousness. The negative view argues that ideas cannot be detached from the material conditions of their production thus it is opposed to a *Weltanschauung* (positive) view of ideology. The implication is that ideology can only be affected by changes in the material base. The negative view sees ideology as 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. This view sees ideology as inhering in thought. Ideology becomes transparent because it appears natural. Ideology is constantly reaffirmed through everyday practice. Thus, the negative view argues that ideology can only be destroyed through praxis that changes the material basis of the production of ideas. While the negative view implies that ideas change only when material conditions change, it is important to realise that the operation of ideology, as process, is also dialectical. Ideology, inhering in social

relationships is both informed by, and informs, the nature of these relationships. A critique of ideology is therefore possible if one addresses the interrelationship between ideology and practice, thereby going beyond surface appearances.

Ideology is it an important concept for critical social research then because ideology serves to obscure the 'true material reality' and must be engaged. 'True material reality' here refers not to self-evident surface appearances but to relations (usually of production) that are obscured by social totalities. The notion of ideology as obscuring relations of production implies that it is a kind of screen that can be removed or transcended. The possibility of transcending ideology depends upon what is taken as ideology.

The positive view frames ideology as false consciousness or world view that can be engaged and transcended. The negative view sees ideology as all pervasive and grounded in the material relations of production. Ideology cannot be disengaged from the material infrastructure. This makes it difficult to reveal the nature of ideology because it means making apparent something that has been transparent and somehow natural. The approach in this case is to identify the essence of social relations (in detail) and separate this essence from structural forms through a process of dialectical deconstruction and reconstruction.

Ideology, of course, does not simply relate to class exploitation; gender, race and other forms of oppression have been legitimated in ideological terms. Patriarchal and racist ideologies can be seen as part of or alternatives to class-based hegemony. For Delphy, the discussion of housework as a set of tasks reflects a patriarchal ideology that obscures the real relations of production within the family unit.

## 1.6.7 Structure

Structure is a term used in two ways in social research. Its principal meaning and the one applicable to critical social research is of structure viewed holistically as a complex set of interrelated elements that are interdependent and that can only be adequately conceived in relation to the complete structure. This is the sense in which structuralism uses the term structure. It also reflects, in general, Marxist views of the structural nature of social systems. What it involves is the idea of wholeness, transformation and self-regulation (Piaget, 1971). Wholeness means an internal coherence, not a simple composite or aggregate of independent elements but parts that are intrinsically linked together as part of a structure. Transformation means that the structure is not static, the intrinsic sets of interrelationships of the elements of the structure make it not only structured but structuring. The structure is capable of transformative procedures. Self-regulation means that the structure makes no appeals beyond itself in order to validate its transformational procedures. Language, for example, is a relational whole with grammatical rules; can transform fundamental sentences into a wide variety of forms whilst retaining them within its structure; and transforms sentences with no reference to an outside reality.

An alternative use of the term structure is to see it as something that can be reduced to its elements. The complexity of a structure is decomposed into a network of linked parts with a view to exposing the elements and simplifying the whole. It is assumed that the elements make sense in their own right. This is more aptly described as a system. It is essentially the approach adopted by structural functionalists. Possibly the easiest way to distinguish structure from system is to see a system as a congealed patterns of interaction, and structure as underlying models of the world that structuralists seek to identify. The reductionist system view tends not to address the dialectical interrelationship of the parts and the whole that is crucial to critical social research.

For Delphy, to break housework down into a system of tasks ignores the relationship between the elements and the whole, which is one of a transforming social relation. The exploitative nature of the tasks done as 'housework' can only be seen when the individual domestic labour is related to the family unit and the domestic unit is related to the broader economic unit. To see housework as tasks denies this structural relationship.

*1.6.8 History*

History refers to both the reconstructed account of past events and the process by which this reconstruction is made; that is, the process of doing history. History writing then involves both a view about the nature of history and the assembling of historical materials. There are a number of ways of 'doing' history and a number of different schemes for categorising history.[15] Rather than assess all these differing views, the nature of the historical perspective embodied in critical social research will be outlined.

Critical social research involves two essential elements, the grounding of a generalised theory in material history and the exposure of the essential nature of structural relations that manifest themselves historically. Critical social research does not accept that history is essentially 'factual'. It denies that history exists and is just lying around waiting to be unearthed by the historian. Like all other aspects of social research history is an interpretive process, the product of the activity of the historian. 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.[16] Approaches that adopt a view of history as an interpretive process rather than the gathering of already existing facts are usually referred to as historicist approaches.

The first tenet of historicism is that history is an interpretive process.[17] A second tenet of historicism is its incorporation of 'objectivity' in one form or another. Historicists either explicitly or implicitly propose an account that reconstructs *the* meanings of events or, in analysing a text, reconstructs *the* meanings of the author. Such meanings are, however, informed by current conceptualisations. The past is thus reconstructed in one way or another on the basis of the present.[18] *Naive historicism* involves an attempt to objectively reconstruct or re-experience the past. While accepting that history is an interpretive process, it presumes that historical events, or the meanings of historical documents can be reconstructed irrespective of the passage of time. In effect, the 'presentist' meaning applied to past occurrences and the questionable nature of the objective reconstruction is apparently naively ignored.

The more frequent *Weltanschauung historicism* attempts to generate an objective account through a specification of 'interests' within a 'world view' (*Weltanschauung*). This specification of interests takes two forms. First, an objectificationist form that sees history as progressing towards some meaningful goal. Such a view is somewhat analogous to a kind of secular version of the eschatological notion of evolution to salvation (Radnitzky, 1973). Historicism in this form is rather doctrinaire, conceiving of a 'plan' that history will reveal. Its extreme form is manifest in utopian historicism in which claims are made that there are laws that govern the inevitable succession of historical stages (for example, in the work of Plekhanov (1940a, 1940b, 1947).

The second specification of interests is rather more a *declaration* of interests. In this approach, the historian declares a perspective that informs the reconstruction of past events. There is no necessary view of the progress of history towards a particular outcome but there is a view that particular interests have been manifested through an historical epoch and that these can be reconstructed through an analysis of documents and events.

Historicism has been adapted as an approach for critical social research in its radical formulations. *Radical* historicism adopts the basic historicist tenets of history as a presentist, objectivist, interpretative process but in one way or another attempts to dig beneath the surface of historical manifestations. This it does through a critical analysis of the prevailing frameworks in which the history is located. There are two main radical historicist tendencies.

*Structural* historicism is the process of reconstructing a honed down history, devoid of confusing instances, as a result of a new perspective gained from a critique of prevailing social structures. This approach analyses the prevailing structure and its ideology, deconstructs it, and then reconstructs a logical history guided by the structural analysis. The point of reference for the historicist reconstruction is not the prevailing social system or contemporary perspective but the radical, dialectically reconstructed, social structure. This approach is illustrated in the review of Marx's analysis of capitalism (section 2.3).

*Critical* historicism reconstructs history through the adoption of a critical *Weltanschauung* (world view). The point of view informs the historical reconstructive process. However, it involves more than just a different point of view upon which to base an historical account. This approach examines the historical genesis of a social system and show how oppressive structures have emerged. It addresses how historical events relate to prevailing social practices and examines the extent to which prevailing structures are sustained through them. This approach is fairly common amongst feminist historians and is explored below in the work of Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987) and can also be seen in Mills' (1956) study of the power structure in the United States in the 1950s.

It is worth noting here that an historicist perspective that declares a 'non-dominant' perspective informing the historical reconstruction is not in itself indicative of a piece of critical social research. While this book is not intended to provide criteria for judging whether or not work qualifies as critical social research, it is intended as a guide to the many ways of doing such research. Without arbitrarily delimiting the scope of critical social research it seems not inconsistent to suggest that the process of critical social research requires more than an alternative perspective. Providing a broader context within which to locate the history of an organisation is indicative of, but not sufficient for, a critical study. Providing a general framework merely situates the specific history, it is only critical if it relates the specific to the wider social structures. In short, a totalistic perspective rather than a holistic framework is required.

Undertaking historical research is a process of detection. Non-interpretive views of history see this process of detection as akin to piecing together a jigsaw puzzle. Interpretive views of history accept that pieces do not fit together into a pre-arranged picture but that each piece has to be interpreted as part of an overall picture. Historicists, in the main, have a fairly good idea of what they think the current picture is and interpret historical events in relation to this picture.[19] The interpretive process of history involves the historian as active detective, seeking out clues, following trails and leads and gradually getting a feel of what is going on. The critical social researcher applies detection not so much to solve a particular problem but to investigate the circumstances within which it occurred. To pursue the analogy, critical social research is not so much interested in who shot John Kennedy but in uncovering the conspiracy (or lack of it) that surrounds the event. Critical social research, of course, does not approach the past as though it were a conspiracy, nor however, does it see it simply as a series of events. The critical approach to history locates events in their social and political contexts, addresses the economic constraints and engages taken-for-granted ideological factors. 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.

So, like all aspects of critical social research, history is not just there waiting to be picked up and fitted into the critical historical account. History has to be researched and critically evaluated as well. Within critical social research the reconstruction of history takes place alongside the structural analysis, it both informs and is informed by it.

*1.6.9 Deconstruction and reconstruction.*
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. It is not necessary to attempt a separate critical analysis of each. 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.

Before addressing how the central concept is analysed it is important to note that the deconstructive-reconstructive process is not just abstract concept analysis tacked on to the usual idealised sequence of events in a research undertaking. 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 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?'. 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, but, as we shall see in the substantive examples, neither is it impossible.

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. This means that the selection of a core concept for analysis is not a once and for all affair. The researcher does not need to select the 'correct' core concept first time, nor is the concept initially selected to be adhered to throughout the analysis. 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. The shuttling back and forth between the abstract and concrete, the unit and the structure, and so on, ensures that when the area of enquiry is taken apart, that this deconstructive process is not static. On the contrary, the deconstruction may prove to be unsatisfactory 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. And 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. Critical social research is about a fundamental understanding; about getting beyond the 'facts' and 'hypotheses' to a deep understanding of a substantive issue.

So, what one has to do is decide on an initial core concept? Bear in mind that the selection is one that derives from constantly mediated thought: the assessment of potential abstract conceptualisations and their relation to concrete social processes. Examine how the concept has been used and then ask what the underlying assumptions are that informs this usage and how it relates to the general area of enquiry. The relationship between the abstract core concept and the area of enquiry should be investigated both at the level of general abstractions and concrete empirical relations. Ask what appears to be going on at the abstract level and how this is manifest in concrete situations? To what extent is there some 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.

*Conventional* social research 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.

Take housework. The conventional approach is to see it as a set of tasks. Delphy addressed it as unpaid domestic work. She showed that deconstructing housework in these terms did not work. Such an analysis failed to address the inconsistencies between work done in one's own home and work done in another's. Nor could it deal with the difference between work done at home that was regarded as economically accountable yet unpaid (butchering a pig) and work that was not (cooking the pig). A more useful deconstruction was to see housework as a relation of production. As work done for another family member. The exploitative nature of housework is thus reconstructable. The hidden nature of this exploitation in economic accounting that focuses on the family unit is revealed in this analysis by analysing the relationships within the family.

With each new conceptual level the area of enquiry is empirically and conceptually deconstructed. The 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[20] 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. As such it differs too, from phenomenological approaches in relating its essentialist analysis to the social totality. This process is one of deconstruction and reconstruction.

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 bear 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.

*1.6.10 Conclusion*
Critical social research involves a perspective that sees social structure as an oppressive mechanism of one kind or another. This oppression is legitimated via dominant ideology. Thus, critical social research involves a totalistic perspective. The structure is a particular historical manifestation and any analysis of it is located in the context of a wider historical analysis. Critical research digs beneath the surface of ostensive appearances through direct analysis of social phenomena. The concepts that frame and define an area of enquiry are themselves subject to critical analysis The taken-for-granted process of abstract conceptualisation is itself subject to investigation. Specific phenomena are analysed by assessing their historical manifestation and how they relate to wider social structures. The critical analytic process is one of deconstructing taken-for-granted concepts and theoretical relationships by asking how these taken-for-granted elements actually relate to wider oppressive structures and how these structures legitimate and conceal their oppressive mechanisms. An alternative non-dominant account is reconstructed. The critical rebuilding involves a process of conceptual shuttling back and forth between the particular phenomena under investigation and the wider structure and history to which it relates; between the taken-for-granted and the deconstructed concepts; and the theoretical deconstruction and the reconstructed social totality. The process leads to a continual revelation of the nature and operation of the oppressive social structure. Critical social research assumes that the world is changed by reflective practical activity and is thus not content to simply identify the nature of oppressive structures but to point to ways in which they can be combated through praxis.

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[1] Joyce Ladner's book was a radical statement in the United States at the time, not least because of its positive assertion of a Black culture, its denial of the relevance of white middle-class norms for assessing Black culture and its claim that (working class) Black womanhood provided the model for the new liberated white middle-class women.

[2] Apart from being a useful comparison, the discussion of critical ethnography serves as a useful outline of an approach that is fairly widely used by critical social researchers but little documented in standard texts on ethnography.

[3] Ethnography generally refers to the detailed study of small groups of people (e.g. in factories, classrooms, hospitals, 'deviant' sub-cultures). Ethnography, as a style of research, uses a wide range of methods of data collection, including in-depth interviewing, personal document analysis, life histories, non-participant observation and especially participant observation. Indeed participant observation and ethnography are terms that sometimes get used interchangeably as some commentators see them as more-or-less synonymous. However, in most accounts, ethnography encompasses a wider range of methods than participant observation. The confusion arises because participant observation, in some usages of the term, itself includes all the above methods. The key difference is that ethnography does not necessarily have to include a *participant* observation

element. Where a distinction is made between participant observation and ethnography, the former is often seen as the exemplary ethnographic method.

[4] There are a large number of different emphases among ethnographers as Hammersley & Atkinson (1982) point out. While most ethnographers aim at detailed patterns of social interaction, others attempt to reveal cultural knowledge and still others consider it an approach suitable to holistic analysis of societies

[5] As McCall & Simmons (1969) note, participant observation involves an 'unusual research design in which hypothesis generation, data gathering and hypothesis testing are carried on simultaneously at every step of the research process' (p. 27) with 'no clean cut progression from exploratory work to description to hypothesis testing' (p. 67) so that participant observation is a 'perpetual reflexive cycle of conceptualization, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and write-up' (p. 127)

[6] There is no intention here to explore the detail of ethnographic practice let alone analyse the variety of ethnographic approaches or the plurality of underlying perspectives. This is extremely well covered in a number of fairly recent books. For a general overview of the ethnographic process see Hammersley & Atkinson (1982). Burgess, (1982) is a useful reader on ethnography with a selection of 'classic' and recent papers and his (1984) provides a sound account of fieldwork although it tends to concentrate on the educational setting. Lofland & Lofland (19++) is a slim volume that details the process of ethnographic research; Spradley's two books (1979 and 1980) provide accounts of how to do unstructured interviewing and participant observation respectively. There are many more older texts which are still pertinent such as Adams & Preiss (1960), Becker (1970), Bogdan & Taylor (1975), Denzin (1970 & 1970a), Filstead (1970), Fletcher (1974), Friedrichs (1975), Hammond (1964), McCall & Simmons (1969), and Wilson (1979).

[7] Thus the ethnographer has to extract these meanings from the plethora of comment, opinion, anecdote, example and intention contained in the responses. This requires a considerable amount of 'thinking on ones feet'. The researcher, particularly when conducting depth interviews, has to be alert to nuances, taken-for-granteds and things left unsaid, as they may provide clues to underlying motives, presuppositions or frames of reference. Gentle probing is crucial, the ethnographer should dig-down into the respondent's frame of reference. A relaxed attitude where short silences are not uncomfortable is important. Depth of response can often be achieved by allowing the respondent chance for a reprise, most easily achieved by not rushing to fill a silence at what appears to be the end of the respondent's reply by hastily asking another question.

[8] The term 'critical ethnography' has also been used to refer to ethnographic study in which reflexivity is an integral element, that is, ethnography in which researchers continually reflect upon, monitor and report their role as researcher in the field in order to avoid misinterpretation and permit third party assessment of the research. Critical ethnography in this sense is the same as modern conventional reflexive ethnography.

[9] By dialogue I mean a two way exchange of ideas not question and answer.

[10] Totality is the idea that social phenomena are interrelated and form a total whole. It is is explained in section 1.6.3

[11] There is no attempt in this book to engage in debates about the 'correct' interpretation of Marx, or whether critical social research is essentially structuralist or humanist. Nor is there a concern with definitions of Marxism, phenomenology or positivism; much less with some balanced comparative analysis of the three orientations. Nor is this book concerned with the adequacy of such a tripartite division of sociology. The prime concern of this book is to provide, in general terms, a straightforward assessment of what are the crucial aspects of a critical methodological

approach. Nor is there any attempt in later sections to clarify the prolonged debates about the nature of racism and sexism. For the purposes of this book it is sufficient to point out that critical social research actively engages racism and sexism.

[12] Lee locates Mills and Lynd in a long tradition of social critique including W.E.B Du Bois, W.I. Thomas, R.E. Park, P.A. Sorokin, O.C. Cox and Willard Waller. Space precludes any examination of this critical tradition.

[13] Some readers may prefer, at this point, to jump to the next part of the book to see some examples of critical social research and come back to this section later after getting a feel for critical research processes. Others who prefer to work from concepts to concrete examples should continue reading this section

[14] This is slightly different from the similar concept of holism. The latter is the view that an organization, institution, or even society, as a functioning whole has an effect on all the parts of which it is made up, and that therefore one should not study these parts in isolation. Totality is similar but emphasises the coherence, importance and reciprocal nature of the structure.

[15] One way of distinguishing between them is in terms of the three categories; historism, historicism and historicalism (Bleicher, 1980; Gadamer, 1975; Radnitzky, 1973;). These rather similar terms represent three quite distinct views of history. Historism sees history as essentially factual and ignores the role of the interpretive subject/historian. Historicism and historicalism both see history as an interpretiveprocess. The former sees the past as being reconstructed from the standpoint of the present while the latter argues that argues that past and present mediate one another.
Other commentators have suggested alternative ways of categorising history. For example, history is divided into pseudo-political categories such as conservative, liberal (Whig) and radical (Marxist) history. Mandelbaum (++++), who argues that history should look for specific causes of events, distinguishes three types of history: sequential, explanatory, interpretive. Sequential goes through the story. Explanatory works back from an event to seek out the diverse (and otherwise unconnected) causes. Interpretive history provides the context for a given historical moment, i.e. tends to be a 'static picture'. A similar kind of approach suggests that history may be descriptive, inferential or contextual. The first simply provides an account, the second draws inferences from events, and the third situates events and actions in a wider context

[16] The process of writing history is sometimes referred to as historiography, especially when it is official historians who are constructing the histories. No doubt the term provides some kind of spurious scientificity to their accounts. Historiography really refers to the study and analysis of history-writing rather than the process of writing history itself and this is the way the term will be used in this book. The process of writing history will simply be referred to as 'history' or 'reconstructing history' if there is any ambivalence between the process and the outcome. To confuse matters further, historiography is also sometimes used to refer to the history of history writing, this is not a usage adopted in this book.

[17] This is where it differs fundamentally from historism

[18] The concern with objectivity and the 'presentist' orientation distinguishes historicism from historicalism.

[19] Historicalists argue that the overall picture is as much an interpretive conundrum as the pieces.

[20] It is radical in the (pre-Thatcherite) sense of a critique of doctrinal preconceptions which fundamentally exposes and questions the prevailing ideology. (Thatcherite 'radicalism' simply reasserts a taken-for-granted dominant ideology).