Critical Social Theory: Core Tenets, Inherent Issues

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the core tenets of critical social theory and describes inherent issues facing evaluators conducting critical theory evaluation. Using critical pedagogy as an example, the authors describe the issues facing evaluators by developing four of the subtheories that comprise a critical social theory: (a) a theory of false consciousness, (b) a theory of crisis, (c) a theory of education, and (d) a theory of transformative action. They conclude by advocating for more, not less, attention being paid to a critical theory approach in evaluation.

Critical social theorists are critical of what they see as pervasive inequalities and injustices in everyday social relationships and arrangements. They view society as a human construction in need of reconstruction. A “critical social theory” is both the process and the outcome of a transformational agenda and brings together multiple beliefs about human understanding and misunderstanding, the nature of change, and the role of critique and education in society. It is an evaluative as well as a political activity that involves assessing how things are in order to transform them into what they ought to be. Because critical social theory advocates for change, it has often been portrayed as a deterministic approach seeking a desired emancipatory outcome (Lather, 1986). Our primary objective in this
chapter is to supplant that perception with another: A desired outcome can only be established in the context of a specific social group seeking to resolve a specific issue.

We conceive of critical theory as a participatory approach that engages constituents or stakeholders in a reflective and critical reassessment of the relationship between overarching social, economic, or political systems, such as capitalism or accountabilism, and everyday practices. Central to a critical theory argument is that systems like capitalism produce knowledge in such a way as to obscure their oppressive consequences. Unjust practices and arrangements, therefore, do not manifest themselves in straightforward ways but become distorted and hidden over time within contextually and culturally embedded practices (Dant, 2003). Critical social theory offers a historical framework that both challenges the theoretical or ideological underpinnings of everyday practice and uses stakeholder perspectives of and experiences with those practices to develop new ways of conceiving of their meaning and purpose in society (Lather, 1986).

In other words, critical theory is the label for a group of participatory, pedagogical, and action-oriented theories that advocate for a certain kind of evaluation or inquiry approach. Participatory because critical theorists cannot know beforehand how a social system has become enmeshed in a particular context and practice, nor can they know what forms of oppression or injustices are present without engaging the stakeholders themselves in identifying and naming those injustices. Pedagogical because critical theorists believe that the process of assessing practices from a critical perspective involves learning new ways of perceiving people's roles and locations in the perpetuation and resistance of oppressive structures. Action oriented because critical social theorists stress that the development of new understanding is contingent on changes in practice and material conditions, and cannot rely on rhetoric alone. Furthermore, critical theorists maintain that critical theory is an integral part of building and sustaining a more just society, one in which all members of that society feel empowered to carry out their practices in ways that foster democratic and empowering processes and outcomes, while continuously monitoring those processes and outcomes for evidence of social injustices.

Although involving analyses of local and historical particularities, critical social theories share several assumptions and approaches. We provide an overview of critical social theory's core principles and concerns, describe how we think it can benefit evaluation practice and society, and conclude by delineating some key issues facing critical social theory evaluators.

**Critical Social Theory**

Critical social theory has a complex and multifaceted history that is usually traced back to the 1920s and 1930s in the work of theorists associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany. Commonly known
as the Frankfurt School, the institute was originally established and funded by Felix Weil, an Argentinean political scientist interested in the study of socialism and Marxism. Before long, however, social, economic, and political conditions, especially in relation to the rise of fascism in various parts of the world, altered the focus of Frankfurt School theorists away from orthodox Marxism to a more varied perspective on theory and culture (Dant, 2003; Rasmussen, 1996). Although varied in terms of specific concerns, theoretical constructs, and disciplinary applications, critical social theories share several core principles. Historically, the primary function of critical theory is the establishment of a sustained critique of all social formations, whether cultural, economic, or political, with an eye to preventing any one form from taking control of the world in a way that is antidemocratic, unjust, exploitative, or oppressive (Dant, 2003; Sherman, 2003).

In general, critical social theorists posit a constitutional relationship between the structures of a society and its members, where everyone is affected, albeit in different ways and to different degrees (Dant, 2003). Connected to this is a belief that the knowledge generated by oppressive systems has become so embedded in everyday practices that it is a distortion and misrepresentation of human experiences and desires. For example, critical theorists believe that modern societies perpetuate oppressive structures by promoting one dominant way of thinking in the form of “instrumental reason” (Dant, 2003, p. 160), which obscures and excludes the values, desires, and experiences of social members. The solution, according to critical social theorists, is to engage in some form of ideology critique that is both critically reflective of people’s roles and experiences in everyday practice and historically grounded in an analysis of how those practices have been developed and supported within modern systems (Calhoun & Karaganis, 2001). This approach is considered necessary because one of the effects obscuring the relationship humans have with dominant structures is that inequalities are taken to be natural occurrences, and so, embedded in the notion of critique is an antioppressive pedagogy oriented to social change. Therefore, critique is emancipatory in that it entails the capability to explore, without constraints, alternative meanings and realities (Dant, 2003).

Furthermore, critical social theorists reject the belief that theory and practice are separate forms of human activity, and view both as intrinsically embodied in praxis, in the way humans act out their theoretical versions of the world. In other words, conversations that tie theory and practice together go beyond the immediate concerns individuals may have to involve a critical appraisal of the values, commitments, visions, and principles they have about their practices, their roles in society, and so on, as well as to a consideration of how their practices enable or hamper reaching those objectives (Schwandt, 2005). A common criticism of critical theory is that it pushes toward a predetermined outcome for these conversations; however, critical theory is primarily a theory of practice that is shaped through its interaction with others regarding that practice.
Modernist and Postmodernist Variations

Although change-oriented and antioppressive in vision, critical social theories differ. One point of contrast occurs between a modernist perspective associated with the Frankfurt School, which relies on the recovery of a critical form of reason as the solution to human emancipation from domination, and a postmodernist perspective exemplified in the work of Michel Foucault, which challenges the effectiveness of such a recovery (Leonard, 1990). Both views stress that even though historically affected, oppressive and emancipatory knowledges must be understood within local and contextually specific practices (Leonard, 1990). Both also assert that language itself carries forth its own history of meaning; thus any account, local or otherwise, needs to be scrutinized for its multiple meanings.

Where they differ, however, is in their overall view of society and the role they bestow to theory in the service of emancipation. For example, even while believing that the intersection of theory and practice occurs in local contexts, Frankfurt School theorists rely on a grand theory of how society changes (in an evolutionary progression) and the necessary means for its evolution toward democracy (through critical rational means) (Leonard, 1990). In their view, enlightenment is achieved through self-knowledge and the ability of oppressed people to recover a genuine narrative of their history (Fay, 1987). Foucaultian theorists, on the other hand, reject evolutionary progressive visions of society as well as the belief that reason is ultimately just (Leonard, 1990). Casting aside a focus on structures of knowledge, they advocate for a genealogical approach that traces the way knowledge and power are produced in discursive formations (Leonard, 1990).

At its extremes, the first view asserts that there is no possibility of emancipation for individuals without structural reorganization, whereas the second wishes to free the individual from the constraints of all structures, discursive or physical. In practice, critical social theorists tend to lean more toward one or the other, but often draw on components of each perspective. For example, multiple modernist perspectives, while still supporting enlightenment ideals of social progress, draw on art, performance, or narrative as an alternative to rational thinking (Conquergood, 2006; Foley, 2002; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005).

Critical Social Theory Evaluation

Conducting critical theory evaluation means taking both a value-committed and value-critical stance (Schwandt, 1997) and advocating for “political democratic ideals” (Greene, 2006, p. 118) while engaging critically with stakeholders about the social values embedded in the practice or issue under scrutiny. Our view is that values are an integral part of what evaluators must deal with, what they bring with them, and what they strive to articulate in their work (Becker, 1967). However, here we are not arguing for taking the side of the rich or the poor, the powerful or the powerless. Instead we are
arguing for taking the side of social justice, and what that means and involves is part of what the inquiry process must both determine and then use as the basis for action. Advocating for democratic ideals does not mean that the evaluator has a predetermined solution for the problems or oppressions articulated by the stakeholders. What it does mean, however, is that critical theory evaluation offers a variety of pedagogical processes that seek to foster the development of a more socially just society, whether by strengthening social capital through citizen deliberation (MacNeil, 2002) or dialoguing about the moral import of a practice (Schwandt, 1989).

Critical theorists seek to engage stakeholders who may not hold similar values or social positions within a program, practice, or community in ways that foster the transformation of individual understandings and adherences to taken-for-granted beliefs about self and others, while developing a commitment to collective action based on the transformative knowledge generated by the group’s interactions (Lather, 1986; Leonardo, 2004). Depending on the context and expressed needs, this engagement can take on multiple forms. The evaluator becomes researcher, facilitator, negotiator, educator, learner, change agent, and critic (Everitt, 1996; MacNeil, 2005).

In other words, critical social theory and critical evaluation share certain assumptions about the promise and role of social inquiry in society. Advocates of both:

- believe that society can be improved, or altered, through education and intervention and that all social practices are interventions, whether they claim neutrality or advocate from a particular stance
- are constrained as well as supported by local contexts, knowledge, interests, and needs
- stress the inclusion of diverse perspectives and interests
- emphasize that the process of the inquiry is just as important as the result, and that it should sustain and develop democratic values and decision-making processes whenever possible
- are self-critical and self-reflective about how their practices are implicated in maintaining or creating oppressive structures and relationships
- assert that local values determining merit and worth need to be accounted for but that their revision or transformation is likely to be one effect or one intended objective of the inquiry
- locate the validity of the inquiry in its capacity to effect change, thus seeking catalytic validity (Lather, 1986) as a central determination of the success or quality of the inquiry

Inherent Issues for Critical Theory Evaluators

Embedded in all critical social theories are four interrelated theories (Fay, 1987, pp. 31–32), which we paraphrase in our own words: (a) a theory of false consciousness, which explains the nature and process through which social
members’ values and beliefs become obscured and distorted by dominant ideologies, (b) a theory of crisis, which locates and describes the source and nature of the oppression in question, (c) a theory of education, which accounts for the conditions and processes necessary for the enlightenment or alternative visions to surface, and (d) a theory of transformative action, which details the kinds of actions and alterations needed to resolve the identified crisis. Enlightenment and emancipatory action are developed by people within a particular sociohistoric context for a specific purpose, and so the value and success of the purpose, process, and structure of a critical theory relies on its catalytic validity, its ability to empower stakeholders to alter their oppressed situation (Lather, 1986; Leonard, 1990).

What does it mean to change our understanding of how society works and how does this presumably new understanding contribute to changing society? If anything has clearly emerged from critical social theory’s history, it is that a transformational agenda takes multiple shapes and targets different needs and interests, and, as such, its variability of means and ends is an issue that every critical theorist inherits and must account for. Drawing on Fay’s (1987) four subtheories and Freire’s (1970/1993) critical pedagogy as examples of a pedagogical and participatory critical approach, we outline the inherent issues (Smith, 2008) facing critical social theorist evaluators. Subsequent chapters provide examples of how some of these issues might play out in practice. The broad question here is: What fundamental issues are involved in a critical approach?

A theory of false consciousness. Critical pedagogy originated with the publication of Freire’s (1970/1993) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, arguably the most important educator in the last half of the 20th century (Kohl, 1997). In the past four decades, the field has undergone many transformations as critical pedagogues have deployed new strategies to confront changing social and historical contexts and to account for the perspectives and considerations of the participants in those contexts. It is thus unsurprising that critical pedagogy is not a unitary set of texts, beliefs, convictions, or assumptions, and some scholars may prefer the plural, critical pedagogies (Norton & Toohey, 2004, p. 2). Nevertheless, these theories share a desire to offer people tools for the critical and creative analysis of their own circumstances (Wallace, 2003). People in different educational and community contexts are encouraged to examine the sociopolitical, economic, and historical realities that shape their lives, in order to make new meanings and develop cultural practices that are critical, transformative, and liberatory.

One of the central beliefs driving critical theory and critical pedagogy is that reeducation is required because the oppressed “have internalized the values, beliefs, and even world view of their oppressors . . . [and] willingly cooperate with those who oppress them in maintaining those social practices that result in their oppression” (Fay, 1987, p. 107). This internalized process, commonly known as false consciousness, raises several issues for the critical evaluator, the first being how to define false consciousness in order to address it.
Freire believed that false consciousness should not be equated with ignorance or a deficiency in individuals. A belief in ignorance promotes what Freire (1970/1993) termed “banking education” (p. 53), which he equates with the use of education as an instrument of oppression. Banking education occurs when teachers as certified possessors of legitimized knowledge perceive learners as empty containers that need to be filled with preestablished bodies of knowledge. Students’, and other learners’, actions are limited to receiving, filling, and storing deposits of information, which are often disconnected from their social realities.

To break with the top-down precedent of banking education, Freire argued for the practice of a political education grounded in an emancipatory pedagogy. For Freire, a critical, liberatory pedagogy emphasizes the development of conscientização, often translated from Portuguese as critical consciousness or consciousness-making. Developing critical consciousness entails assessing the system of social institutions, social traditions, and social relations that create and maintain conditions of oppression, while also recognizing and acknowledging one's role in that system. The learner should be able to situate him- or herself in his or her own historicity, for example, to grasp the class, race, and gender aspects of education and social formation and to understand the complexity of the relations that have produced this situation (Aronowitz, 1998, p. 14). Critical consciousness enables the oppressed to see themselves as active subjects, rather than passive objects that are acted upon. Critical consciousness is the beginning point of liberatory praxis, configured as an ongoing, reflective approach to taking action.

Although false consciousness can be thought of as “social life . . . systematically distorted by social forces” (Wood, 1988, p. 358), it is often cast as a stagnant, uncritical, and uneducated view of the world held by some individuals and not others, rather than as a complex social phenomenon affecting all people, albeit in different ways. In Freire’s (1970/1993) view, everyone, the oppressors as well as the oppressed, are appropriate subjects for emancipation. The goal in his democratic approach is a drive toward reconciliation. Reconciliation involves the joint recognition by individuals who are positioned in unequal relation with each other, such as teachers–students, staff–clients, doctor–patient, of the way they have both been thus positioned by systems of oppression. The solution to resolving the teacher–student contradiction lies in both parties understanding their interdependent, often unintended, contributions to the maintenance of the oppressive situation. For transformation to occur for anyone, transformation has to occur for all. Power and powerlessness sustain each other, and in the tensions created in that interdependency are the possibilities for new relationships and new configurations of arrangements (Fay, 1987).

Critical social theorists hold different opinions about how best to address false consciousness. If false consciousness is understood as an individual condition, the success or failure of its release (i.e., the solution) is dependent upon individual ability, desire, or motivation. Understanding
false consciousness as a phenomenon created within society brings about its own challenges in terms of structural reorganization (Augoustinos, 1999). Therefore, understanding the relationship between false consciousness and emancipation is a core issue for evaluators considering a critical approach.

A theory of crisis. Because the complex relationship between false consciousness and reconciliation involves understanding how the effects of power create divided and conflicted relationships among stakeholders, it follows that the identification of a genuine crisis whose resolution supports and enables reconciliation will not be easy. The crises most likely to be first considered are themselves most apt to have been manufactured by systems of oppression. These are the ones that, although seeming to benefit underprivileged or other marginalized groups, serve to maintain structures that create systems where group interests are pitted against each other, hiding the reality of people’s joint dehumanization. Crises such as “achievement gaps” or “welfare mothers” contribute to maintaining a system in which people who are so identified are seen as problems in relation to people who are not, rather than considering that a system that contributes to these effects is in need of reconfiguration. An issue facing evaluators is how to affirm and recognize the importance these manufactured crises play in people’s lives while moving the conversation to one of understanding how society has created these issues.

One of the fundamental issues of a participatory-oriented critical theory is its reliance on the willingness and interest of humans to reflect on and dialogue about their own practice. People are often inundated with calls for change, making this kind of profound inquiry likely to be resisted. The critical evaluator has to work within the reality of this resistance, understand the history of the practice and people involved, and willingly listen to multiple contradictory perceptions of what ought to be the purpose of the evaluation, its process, and outcome. Learning and listening are a crucial part of this process, as the evaluator seeks to understand the lived details of the people connected to the practice or program under scrutiny. In such a way, mutual trust is built from a shared horizon of possible perspectives, and the impetus for commitment and change becomes the necessary signal that more critical work can begin.

A commitment to active engagement and learning is necessary so that the dialogue that follows encourages everyone to listen and learn as much as possible about the apparent issues, how these issues are thought to have come about, how they are being expressed, and by whom. In this way, uncovering the values, assumptions, contradictions, and tensions becomes a major part of the evaluative process, a process that assists in understanding the crisis of which these issues are a symptom. Within the perceptions of those involved lie differing beliefs about the relationship of structures to agency, the nature of understanding and change, or the role of teaching and learning. What the program or practice means to the people involved, what effect, if any, it has on their lives, are the kernels of its importance and effect on people, and the building blocks of a critical theory (Kushner, 2000).
A theory of education. Education, here, is conceived of in its broadest sense, as the teaching and learning that takes place in any social group, not just formal schooling. For Freire (1970/1993), the cornerstone of his critical pedagogy was dialogue, whether it occurred in formal or informal social gatherings. Freire (1970/1993, 1998a) believed that true dialogue is infused with love for the world and for people, humility, faith in humankind, and hope for positive change. Love is commitment to others and to the cause of liberation (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 70). This kind of dialogue involves a commitment to seeing others as having something to teach us and in turn showing those others that we have faith in our interconnected ability to remake the world.

In this conception of education, face-to-face dialogue between people who hold different conceptions of the world or practice under scrutiny is crucial. Dialogue becomes the basis within which a critical and problem-posing discourse is acquired and practiced. The critical educator committed to reconciliation challenges the learners with whom she communicates by practicing problem-posing education (Freire, 1970/1993). Problem-posing education, or “education as the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994), promotes practices that encourage people to perceive critically the way they exist in the world and see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. The point of departure must be the “here and now”—the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they can intervene. Through problem-posing dialogue, the stakeholders begin to understand why they must comprehend the effects society has had on the creation of their current situation in order to begin to break free of that hold and articulate new configurations for themselves and their practice. The educator or evaluator becomes facilitator and participant of this dialogic process, sometimes taking on multiple roles, such as Clayson et al. (2002) did in a multicultural setting, as they acted as “interpreters, translators, mediators, and storytellers” (p. 35), each role advancing negotiation and democratizing processes in important ways.

There is a fragile line between critical education and indoctrination into criticality that must be attended to (Burbules & Berk, 1999). One criticism of critical pedagogy is its inability to move out of a modernist, progressive view of education as the means to emancipation—an emancipation guided by the vision of a possible utopia (Biesta, 1998). Biesta (1998) provides one example of an alternative way of thinking of emancipation through education. Rather than view education as a process of replacing distortions with an ideal democratic society, he suggests that educators shed all pretense of knowing the critical route to emancipation. In other words, Biesta asserts that critical pedagogy’s weakness is its taken-for-granted acceptance of its own authority. He argues instead for a renewal of human interaction itself, interactions that are characteristically unpredictable, contradictory, and non-teleological. By questioning and dialoguing, stakeholders find out about themselves and their hopes and beliefs, as they work to construct and reconstruct a possible version of their social world (Schwandt, 2002).
Developing a critical process does not require consensus of perspective and procedure (Freire, 1998b; 2005); it does require trust in each other’s desire to learn and inquire together, which involves risk and exposure and humility (Freire, 2005), as well as pride. Mutual trust is invited at the onset, when the evaluator describes a critical theory approach with honesty about what it entails from people in terms of time, commitment, and the lack of a clear process. Mutual trust, and thus critical work, however, might not be a feasible goal in some settings or in settings where the evaluator has not already established a long-term working partnership (Mathison, 1994). These issues all become part of the overall judgment call of critical theory evaluators.

A theory of transformative action. As mentioned previously, critical theory is not a theory that is imposed on a process, but a process that puts into practice a multiplicity of theories in the creation of transformative action. A critical approach does not seek to offer or impose solutions because “part of the solution can be found in how the problem is addressed in the first place” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 13). In other words, people’s awareness of their complicity or oppressive behavior has to accompany their response to it; this can only happen simultaneously in practice. The validity of the process is found in the success of the transformative or emancipatory action. But what is emancipation? How is it achieved? Is it an individual transformation or a social one? Fay (1987) has criticized critical social theory for its emphasis on the enlightenment of individuals at the expense of understanding its relevance for “mass social action” (p. 108).

Evaluators’ views of emancipation are shaped by the evaluation practice and context, and draw on their understandings about false consciousness and education. Conceptualizing alternative ways of bringing about emancipatory outcomes and remaining open to what emancipation might look like, while simultaneously working for its achievement, are challenges facing the critical evaluator. We believe that the ability to conceptualize these overlapping and mutually dependent perspectives is essential if the critical social theory evaluator is going to be successful at effectively communicating to a variety of stakeholders what participation and commitment to a critical theory evaluation entails.

The Road Ahead

Greene (2001) and Mertens (2001) argued for a renewed commitment to examine and reconsider the role of evaluation in society, especially in regards to its potential to uncover and overturn oppressive social practices. Furthermore, House (1993, 2005) has long argued that a condition plaguing evaluation is that it has a tendency to be taken up by and to reflect the problems of modern society, rather than to act as its arbiter. House advocated for principles of inclusion, dialogue, deliberation, and social justice as central to evaluation practice and as one way to prevent evaluation from
serving the status quo, while also benefiting society. For House and others, the link between social justice and evaluation seems a natural fit, as both are intended to assist in improving society.

To be certain, other evaluation models are directed at engaging stakeholders in deliberation and transformational narratives in order to move social organizations toward more empowering or socially just practices. There is, however, not a single critical approach. Quite the contrary, we see our work drawing from multiple evaluation models, such as responsive, participatory, and deliberative democratic, as well as valuing the contribution of an explicit critical theory perspective. Our aim is to shed some light on a tradition that has received its share of criticisms in a way that fosters growth and understanding of its potential for evaluation. Although many of the criticisms it has garnered, such as being too theoretical and distant from the lives of real people (Lather, 1986), too rhetorical as opposed to action oriented (Anderson, 1989), too disempowering as opposed to empowering (Ellsworth, 1989), and lacking its own self-awareness and critique (Gore, 1992, 1993), are, in some cases, warranted, this does not justify abandoning a critical theory agenda. Rather, it suggests a need for more, not less, examination of its strengths and weaknesses; engaging in, rather than retreating from, questioning; and considering how critical theory evaluation can benefit the field of evaluation, the programs we serve, and society.

Critical theory offers a theoretical lens for assessing the relationships individuals have with the social structures and institutional practices they work within and encounter every day. It offers a way to understand better the effect these social structures have on people’s beliefs, ideologies, actions, interactions, and communicative practices, while also generating insight into processes that resist, challenge, or reshape dominant forms of thinking and acting. Central to a critical theory approach is maintaining a continuous investigation of the connections between theory and practice so that the two are enmeshed and become one (Schwandt, 2005). Understanding the conditions that support or impede critical theory evaluation provides the evaluation community with a clearer perspective on its use in evaluation and contributes to broader conversations about evaluation and evaluation’s role in society.

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References


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