

Critical Theory and its Educational Implications in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Critical theory is the output of a herd of German social theorists, first associated with the Institute for Social Research begun in Frankfurt Germany in 1923, and who later moved to and were influential in the US. Critical theory incorporates a wide range of approaches all focused on the idea of freeing people from the modern state and economic system – a concept known to critical theorists as emancipation. This paper aims to provide a concise introduction about the critical theory with its principal tenets and critiques along with philosophical root(s) and the research components. It also overviews the overall educational implications of critical theory in contrast to the other sociological theories in the field of educational research. Moreover, the paper provides insights into how researchers’ contextualize the critical theory in the educational landscape of Nepalese scenario.

Key Words: Critical Theory, Principal tenets, Philosophical root(s), Research components, Criticism, Educational implication, Nepal

Introduction

Philosophy is the study of nature of reality and existence i.e. universal knowledge. It is more a way of thinking about and asking ‘questions’. It attempts to answer ‘unanswered’ or ‘unanswerable’ questions. Education is meant for facilitating values and virtues in humans. Similarly, it is the process of teaching and learning knowledge and skills necessary for survival and sustenance in life.

Sociology is the Science of fundamental laws of social relations, institutions, etc. It is the study of origin, development, organization, functioning, and classification of human societies. It can also be understood as a 'proven' hypothesis and has

a basis in facts or evidences. We study various aspect of society along with sociological theories in sociology. Sociological theory consists of abstract and testable propositions about society. It often heavily relies on the scientific method, which aims for objectivity, and attempts to avoid passing normative value judgments.

There are many sociological theories, among them, critical theory is one. Critical theory stresses the reflective assessments and critique of society and culture by applying knowledge from the social sciences and the humanities. It maintains that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation. In sociology and political philosophy, the term "critical theory describes the Neo-Marxist philosophy of

the Frankfurt School, which was developed in Germany in the 1930s.

Objectives

This paper examines the principal tenets and critiques of critical theory discussing its philosophical root(s) and the research components by explaining its educational implications in contrast to the other sociological theories in the Nepalese scenario.

Methodology

The methodology that used to prepare this paper is analysis, synthesis, abstraction, induction, deduction and generalization. Mainly data are taken from secondary sources i.e. books, journals articles, dissertation and reports related to the critical theory using library methods visiting library and websites.

Discussion

Critical Theory and its Principal Tenets

The term "critical theory" was first coined in 1937. While having a long legacy and being far from being a single body of thought, critical theory is typically associated with the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt University. 'Frankfurt School' emerged in the 1930s and included such scholars as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and somewhat later, Jurgen Habermas. Fuchs(2015,p.1) states that:

Critical theory is an approach that studies society in a dialectical way by analyzing political economy, domination, exploitation, and ideologies. It is a normative approach that is based on the judgment that domination is a problem, that a domination-free society is needed. It wants to inform political struggles that want to establish such a society.

Critical theory is understood as a critique of society. Critical theory denotes a school of academic thought which challenges dominant ways of exploring and explaining organizational phenomenon (Scherer, 2009). According to Harney(2014, p.1), "Critical theory provides a solid foundation from which to question neutral per formative intent and explore the dehumanizing effects of managerial control".

It is the responsibility of the critical theory to emancipate people from such repressive and taken for granted ideas (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 129). Its principal intentions are twofold; political and transformative. The former is concerned with emancipating and empowering educationalists; emancipation from the power agendas imposed on them. Hence, critical theory depicts those imposed interests and questions their legitimacy with regards to equality and democratic orientations. On the other hand, critical theory is transformative in the sense that" it seeks to "transform the society and individuals to social democracy" (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 28). In this regard,Corradetti (2013) mentioned that:

Critical theorists, in their turn, rejected both the metaphysical apparatus of Hegel and the eschatological aspects connected to Marx's theory. On the contrary, critical theory analyses were oriented to the understanding of society and pointed rather to the necessity of establishing open systems based on immanent forms of social criticism.

Critical theory sets out to critique repressive social practices and institutions in today's world and advance emancipation by supporting ideas and practices that meet the universalist principles of justice. This kind of critique has a transformative dimension in the sense that it aims at changing national

societies, international relations and the emerging global society, starting from alternative ideas and practices lingering in the background of the historical process.

Philosophical Root(s)

According to Rush(2004,p.25, "critical theory attempts to rescue from idealism a conception of reason as unified in its practical and theoretical employment, coupled with a dialectical and materialist account of human flourishing". Regarding the Philosophical root of critical theory, Regelski (2005) expressed that:

The roots of Critical Theory go deep. For example, Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave first raised the basic problem addressed by critical theory: people bound to illusions can be happier than with the freedom afforded by the light of day. Being torn away from illusions is therefore painful and threatening. People are thus often comforted by their chains. Since attaining 'true' knowledge is a difficult matter, such people too often seize upon what seems obvious to them or what is most easy to grasp, rather than inquiring more deeply and thoughtfully and reflecting on the fruits of their actions.

The philosophical root of critical theory belongs to post-positivism and critical paradigm. Post positivism paradigm in Taylor & Medina's (n.d.pp.2-3) words, " is the modified scientific method for the social sciences. It aims to produce objective and generalizable knowledge about social patterns, seeking to affirm the presence of universal properties/laws in relationships amongst pre-defined variables". They further say that the quality standards of this paradigm are objectivity, validity and reliability, which can be modified with the use of triangulation of data, methods and theories.

Similarly, Myak, (2010,p.9) insisted that "the critical educational researcher aims not only to understand or give an account of behaviors in societies but to change these behaviors. The critical paradigm embodies different ideologies such as postmodernism, neo-Marxism and feminism". Gage (1989, p.5) explains that critical theory originated from the criticism that educational research was too technical and concerned with only efficiency and rationality of design, neglecting social inequalities and issues of power. According to the critical theorists, researchers should be looking for the "political and economic foundations of our construction of knowledge, curriculum, and teaching" (As cited in *ibid*). On the basis of these two philosophical root the researcher work applied critical theory, one of the sociological theories of philosophy.

Research Component of Critical Theory

Fuchs (2015,p.2) asserts, " Critical theory was used as a camouflage term when the Frankfurt theorists were in exile from the Nazis in the United States, where they were concerned about being exposed as communist and Marxian thinkers and therefore took care in the categories they employed". He further adds that different approach is to identify dimensions of critical theory at the content level. There are three research components on the basis of which we analyze the critical theory. The first concerns its ontology, the second is epistemology ,and the third is methodology. Ontology is a theory of being, it deals with the question how reality is organized and develops. Epistemology is a theory of knowledge, it deals with how the very concepts that constitute a theory are constituted and organized. The methodology is the process, strategies way of studying the phenomena.

Ontology

Ontologically, reality in the critical research paradigm is described within a political, cultural, historical, and economic context. The ontological position of the critical paradigm is historical realism. Historical realism is the view that reality has been shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; reality that was once deemed plastic has become crystallized (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). In Scotland (2012 p.13) words, "realities are socially constructed entities that are under constant internal influence". Similarly, Mertens (2008, pp 74-75) states that the "transformative emancipatory ontology assumption holds that there are diversities of viewpoints with regard to many social realities but that these viewpoints need to be placed within political, cultural, historical, and economic value system to understand the basis for the differences."

Epistemology

Epistemologically, the critical theory researchers emphasize the importance of the interactive relation between the researcher and the participants and the impact of social and historical factors that influence them. Mertens (2008, p. 99) holds that the "interaction between the researchers and the participants is essential and requires a level of trust and understanding to accurately represent viewpoints of all groups fairly." Scotland (2012) asserted that critical epistemology is one of subjectivism which is based on real world phenomena and linked with societal ideology. Knowledge is both socially constructed and influenced by power relations from within society. Cohen et al. (2007, p. 27) explains that, "what counts as knowledge is determined by the social and positional power of the advocates of that knowledge." Regarding knowledge

on trees, different organizations have differing beliefs.

Methodology

Critical methodology is directed to raise the awareness of participants and interrogate accepted injustice and discrimination. Critical theorists are "concerned with action rather than discovery" (Edge and Richards, 1998, p.341). Critical researchers have an agenda of change to improve the lives and situations of the oppressed. Creswell (2009, p.9) states that "the advocacy/participatory worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda." Researchers and participants are involved in the research process. Participants may help in designing question research, collecting and analyzing data. Critical methodology is directed at interrogating values and assumptions, exposing hegemony and injustice, challenging conventional social structures and engaging in social action (Crotty, 1998, p. 157).

Inquiry is inseparable from politics. Its aim is to emancipate the disempowered. Researchers embrace their ideology as they recognize that "no research methodology is value free" (Pring, 2000b, p. 250). Therefore, the starting point of a critical researcher is often preconceived. Finding out is the means, change is the underlying aim. Mertens (2008) argues that critical researchers may use qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods but should be aware of the underlying contextual, historical and political factors inherent to the subject under interrogation. They use methods that enable them to critically study situations from cultural, economic, political, and historical perspective. They may use focus group interviews, open ended interviews, participant observation, journals, surveys and questionnaires.

Criticism

Despite the emancipatory interests of the critical theory, it is not immune to criticism. First, critical theory needs more clarification since its aims are ambiguous. It strives to achieve its emancipatory agendas in principal. But, how? This is still ambiguous in so far as a number of forms and approaches of critical theory exist. Another critique concerns the interwoven knowledge that encompasses the positivistic, interpretive and emancipatory aims. This entanglement makes it difficult to attain the knowledge and then eliminate all obstacles of social justice. Self-reflectiveness or critique is not a prerequisite for emancipation especially in educational settings. In this sense, Ferreira(2018) added that:

The main challenge for critical theory then is to connect theory to practice, to be able to set up a theoretical lens that results in a real-world transformative outcome. It is not enough to understand and trace the origins of harm and displacement in the world; it is crucial to use that understanding to reach fairer security arrangements that do not neglect refugees' claims to basic rights.

A relevant critique seeks to trace forms of exclusion that instigate both redistribution and recognition struggles and then identify the potential for progressive change inspired by immanent ideas, norms and practices. From a critical perspective, then, people – not states – must be put at the centre of politics, global or otherwise.

Educational Implication in Nepalese Scenario

The educational implication of critical theory belongs to review and reform of the educational contents. It criticizes the traditional course contents and advocates for new

contents according to the need and interest of students relating to the new trend and scenario of the society. Applied to education, critical inquiry focuses first on raising the conscious awareness of teachers about established values and beliefs that underpin their seemingly natural teacher-centered classroom roles (Taylor, 2008). Critical theory is introduced (e.g., critical pedagogy, cultural inclusiveness, social justice) that stimulates teachers' creative thinking about designing curricula and assessment that are more student-centered, inquiry oriented, culturally sensitive, community-oriented, socially responsible, etc. The educational implication of critical theory in Nepalese scenario can be mentioned as below in light of the background of this theory.

- By bringing social philosophy, theory, and research to bear on understanding humans being human, critical theory helps us realize that much of our philosophy, theory and research never gets down-to-earth enough to help us to engage, sustain, and develop the natural interest and love for education that all children have in Nepal.
 - The process of immanent critique, whereby legitimation crises are identified by using claims made for an ideology or method as criteria for evaluating its rationality, is simply needed and long overdue in acquiring education
 - For critical theory rational action necessarily involves action ideals that regulate the formative process of day-to-day teaching and by which the right action of teaching can be evaluated.
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- Critical theory teaches us to concern ourselves primarily with the phronesis of “right action” that guides and sustains all helping professions.
- Critical theory points out once again the need for addressing the question “what to teach” and “why” before operational research or questions involving how to teach are even considered.
- Critical theory puts a new responsibility on teachers who can no longer be satisfied to “teach the way they were taught.”
- It is concerned to educate teachers who problematize paradigms and practices for signs of ideology, false consciousness, and failure to achieve what is promised (Regelski, 2005, pp.16-19).

Conclusion

Critical theory involves a rich tradition of philosophy, social theory, and social science. Critical theory assumes an active role in the betterment of human affairs according to the potential for freedom inherent in modernity and the identification of political alternatives at hand in the globalising society and the historical process bringing it into being. Critical Theory constitutes one of the major intellectual traditions of the twentieth century and is centrally important for philosophy, political theory, aesthetics and the theory of art, the study of modern European literatures and music, the history of ideas, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. (Rush, 2004).

Critical theory was a dominant approach in the social sciences in the years after the 1968 student protests. The rise of

neoliberalism and postmodernism in the 1980s transformed universities in such a way that critical theory became less prevalent. Critical theory insists that one needs a theory of society grounded in a theory of capitalism to make sense of socio-historical processes and developments because the dynamics of capitalism play such a constitutive role in social life. Critical theory is thus intrinsically global and historical, and attempts to provide the "Big Picture" that sketches the fundamental outlines of socio-economic development and the ways in which capitalism structures social life, as well as the dynamics through which a capitalist society can be replaced by a socialist one (Kellner, n. d.).

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