ON THE MERITS OF INTELLECTUAL MASTURBATION:
CRITICAL THEORY AND EMPIRICISM

Stahl, Bernd Carsten, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester LE1 9BH, UK,
bstahl@dmu.ac.uk

Abstract:
In most social sciences, including information systems, empirical research is seen as the gold standard to be aspired to. This paper draws on critical theory in information systems and considers the status of empirical research in this stream of research. Critical research can be defined by the desire to emancipate. Such emancipation must be based on ethical premises. The desire to change the world cannot be deduced from observation. The ethical underpinnings of critical research create problems for empirical investigations. While one can collect data on people's moral preferences and their ethical justifications, such data cannot provide ethical legitimacy of certain courses of action. Empirical research, while valuable for a variety of reasons, can therefore not answer some of the central questions of critical research, including what the content of emancipation is or how it should be achieved. Based on this argument, the paper raises the question of relative weighting of empirical and conceptual work and suggests treating conceptual research as at least as valuable as empirical work.

Key words: critical theory, critical research in IS, empiricism,

1 INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx famously said that engaging in philosophy and studying the real world share a relationship comparable to the one between masturbation and sexual love.¹ What this seems to imply is that it is a waste of time to engage in philosophical introspection or armchair philosophising and that scholars need to get out into the real world, do real research, find out social realities and improve upon these. A large proportion of IS scholars, be they of a positivist, interpretivist or critical persuasion would probably agree with this view. Empirical research is highly esteemed in IS. Even alternative approaches that explicitly aim to question prevailing orthodoxy such as critical research in information systems share the view that one needs to engage with realities "out there". In this paper I will attempt a different conceptualisation of IS research. I will analyse the label of critical research and attempt to clarify what critical research has to do with empirical research. My argument will be that there are fundamental problems of empirical critical research, which cannot be reduced to issues of approach or methodology. For several reasons the hope to find out what happens out there by empirical research is simply not tenable from a critical point of view. If this is true, then critical research may only have a limited contribution to make to IS scholarship if the main purpose of IS research is to find, analyse and interpret data. However, critical research has a serious contribution to make in terms of conceptual clarity and questioning of dominant IS discourses. This contribution will nevertheless usually not be of an empirical but of a conceptual nature. Criticalist who agrees with Marx's view may thus have to settle for non-empirical intellectual masturbation (i.e. conceptual research) as sexual intercourse (i.e. empirical research) may be unavailable.

¹ "Philosophie und Studium der wirklichen Welt verhalten sich zueinander wie Onanie und Geschlechtsliebe" (Marx & Engels, 1953, p. 218) (translation by the author)
Critical research in IS is often described as an alternative to positivist or interpretivist research (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). While there is evidence of research that purports to be critical of mainstream IS in some way or other going back at least 20 years to the 1984 IFIP 8.2 conference in Manchester, the field of critical research in IS (CRIS) seems to have gained momentum after the year 2000. There have been a number of special issues, including one in IT & People. It is nevertheless not always clear what we mean by critical research. In IS discussions of research methodologies and approaches, CRIS is often described as a paradigm, which can be contrasted with other paradigms. The tripartition of the world in the paradigms of positivism, interpretivism and critical research is problematic, to say the least. The term “paradigm” is fuzzy and seems to imply that it includes a bunch of aspects (e.g. ontology, epistemology, methodology, view of humans etc.) but there is no agreement on what exactly these aspects are or what their relationship is. Furthermore, the use of these three paradigms seems to suggest that they are comprehensive (one must choose one of the three) and that they are mutually exclusive (if one chooses one, one cannot choose another). Neither of these inferences is correct.

Because of this limited usefulness of the concept of paradigm to explain CRIS, I have elsewhere suggested that the approach can be defined by its intention, topics, and theories (anonymised, 2008). The most important difference between CRIS and positivist or interpretivist work is that CRIS follows a critical intention to change the status quo and promote emancipation. In all other aspects, a criticalist can arguably have the same views as a positivist or an interpretive scholar. A look at current debates in CRIS (e.g. Howcroft & Trauth, 2005) reveals that things are not quite as simple. Scholars who use the label of “critical” tend to share more than just a general critical outlook. They tend to be sceptical of knowledge claims raised by mainstream positivism and share a questioning attitude to mainstream assumptions about ontology, epistemology, rationality, the role of the researcher, and many other aspects of research. This shared rejection of the mainstream does not translate into a shared view of the world. There is no clearly and unequivocally shared way of doing critical research. There are a number of topics that seem to be generally recognised in critical circles as worth investigating, including questions of power, gender, or race. There are also theories, such as those developed by Habermas, Foucault, Bourdieu and others that require little justification when used in a critical context. What is less than clear is what it actually mean to do critical research and according to which criteria a piece of research can be deemed successful.

3 ON UNDERTAKING CRIS

One approach to the problem of how to do critical research can be via the concept of methodology. McGrath (2005) wrote the probably most prominent piece dedicated to this issue. She discusses the problem from the point of view of the critical scholar who wants to get published in established outlets. Most reviewers who work in support of IS journals have certain expectations which are shaped by the social norms and practices of their academic community. In IS as part of empirically-oriented social sciences, this means that reviewers are likely to expect a structure that includes a description of a methodology. Lack of an explicit discussion of methodological issues is likely to be interpreted as a lack of attention to detail and academic rigour. It thus lessens the probability of a paper being accepted. McGrath’s desire to have a critical methodology at her disposal is thus understandable in practical and political terms.

At the same time it is also problematic. Strong reliance on methodology may suggest a positivist view of the world. The idea behind methodologies is that standardised and clear steps in undertaking research will lead to transparent and reproducible outcomes, which therefore withstand questioning and can count as established knowledge. Such a view is based on a mechanistic worldview. It is doubtful whether this is applicable to CRIS. First, there is the issue of ideological assumptions hidden in the methodology. Methodologies can have beliefs and assumptions embedded in them that are hard to keep apart from the methodology itself. These assumptions are typically part of the overall (scientific) worldview of the researcher. A good example of this is the topic of gender. Gender research has now been recognised as worthwhile in IS but it is far from
agreed how such research has to be undertaken. A positivist approach to gender, for example, tends to see gender as one variable which can be correlated to other variables. Gender is typically measured on a survey by ticking either a "male" or a "female" box. This is a methodological approach but it carries problematic baggage. It enshrines the belief that the difference between genders is clear and worth exploring. It is, moreover, bivalent in its view of gender, implying that one must be either male or female and that the differences between males and females as subsets of the population are more relevant than the differences among the genders.

One could argue that this is not necessarily a major problem for critical research because criticalists have a higher self-awareness of their own bias and would be able to correct for them. There are, however, further problems with the idea of a critical methodology. As was pointed out in the responses to McGrath’s paper, CRIS is arguably not bound to a particular methodology. This is supported by the definition of CRIS that I have offered earlier. If the main defining feature of critical research is its desire to emancipate and change the status quo, then this is likely to be possible via a multitude of ways. Methodology then becomes a mere tool to be used to further this aim. Awareness of the inbuilt assumptions of such a tool is important. If it is given, then any approach can lead to successful critical interventions.

This view is probably widely accepted among scholars interested in CRIS. It has the political advantage of leaving everybody free to engage in research in whichever way they like while not being completely relativist with regards to CRIS. I believe that it is still problematic, however, because it still contains the unspoken assumption that critical research needs to include empirical investigations.

3.1 CRIS and Ethics

My main argument why critical and empirical research can be problematic is based on the ethical underpinnings of critical research. There is an intuitive link between critical work and ethics. It is easy to argue that the attempt to emancipate must be based on an ethically motivated belief that the status quo is problematic and calls for emancipation. One can rephrase this view from a logical perspective, pointing out that critical research contains ethical premises. The argument here goes like this; critical research is not purely descriptive but prescriptive in that it promotes a change of the social world. In order to come to the normative conclusion that the world should be changed, there needs to be a normative premise that change is desirable. Such a normative premise cannot be derived from observation but must be based on ethical underpinnings.

Again, I believe this to be relatively uncontentious. The problem begins when we try to pin down what exactly the ethical premise of critical research is and how it should influence critical activities. There is very little work that investigates these questions. This is certainly true for applied critical disciplines including critical management studies (CMS) or CRIS but it is also true for much of what has classically been termed critical theory. A notable exception to this is Habermas’s work and his theory of communicative action, which is directly linked to the development of discourse ethics. Elsewhere (anonymised, 2008) I have suggested different ways of framing the ethical aspect of CRIS. The problem here is that, in order to take questions of ethics seriously, one needs to engage with philosophical ethics. A resulting problem, beyond the sheer infinite amount of literature on ethics, is that there is no agreement on what ethics is and how it can be made fruitful for critical research. Some of the great and foundational narratives of philosophical ethics attempt to define the principles that would help us understand the difference between good and evil and provide ways of assessing the ethical quality of actions or norms. Unfortunately there is little agreement between these narratives. Some, following from Aristotle, emphasise the importance of character traits of the agent. Others, most notably Immanuel Kant and his deontological disciples, stress the importance of intention. Others again, in the tradition of James and John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, point out the relevance of consequences of actions for their ethical evaluation.

The problem is that all of these (an innumerable others) strike a chord and have some intuitive truth to them. When you engage in IS development for the promotion of emancipation of, say, traditionally underserved segments of the population in western society, then all of these aspects play a role. Your intention to enable emancipation has an important ethical quality. At the same
time, it is of ethical relevance whether the consequences of the action lead to emancipation. It will also be subject to ethical evaluation whether you as a person stand authentically for the emancipatory project. While many ethical theories are thus supportive of critical research, there is no agreement on which one should be followed. Philosophical discourse has shown that virtually every ethical theory has its weaknesses and areas where it becomes counter-intuitive. Attempts to develop these theories to the point where universal agreement is possible have not been successful. My personal view is that they are not likely to be successful and it may even show a fundamental misunderstanding of philosophical ethics to assume that there will ever be a consensus among philosophers (or the general public) concerning ethical theories.

The disagreement on ethics is old news in philosophy where debates between different ethical theories have been the lifeblood of the discipline for centuries. It is more problematic for applied work such as CRIS where ethics plays an important role but where ethical foundations are not usually made an explicit topic of reflection. One of the contributing factors is that ethics raises unexpected challenges with regards to empirical research.

3.2 Ethics and Empirical Research

One reason why ethics poses problems for social science-oriented research prevalent in IS is linked to conceptual issues. I have so far not engaged in any ethical theorising but I now need to introduce an important distinction. From now on I will use the terms "ethics" and "morality" in a substantially different way. "Morality" stands for the rules and norms that govern the behaviour of a group. "Ethics" is the theoretical reflection and justification of morality. This distinction is not necessitated by the terms themselves, which mostly differ in their etymological provenance (one comes from Greek, the other from Latin) but it is useful to follow. There is a debate in philosophy whether such a distinction is necessary and some philosophers use the terms synonymously. Others follow this distinction because of the undeniable differences in the content of the two terms.

Morality according to this view stands for rules and regulations that guide individual or collective behaviour. In terms of IS, a moral rule might take the form of: "do not invade customer data privacy unnecessarily" or "respect your client's preferences when implementing a software project". These are moral rules because they indicate what is considered correct (or morally good) behaviour. Ethics can provide theoretical underpinnings and justifications for moral rules. With regards to privacy, one can argue that respect of privacy is an expression of a respect for others as ends in themselves (a Kantian type of argument) or that it will lead to customer satisfaction and thus continuing business to everybody's advantage (a utilitarian type of argument). Discussions of ethically relevant questions in IS (e.g. privacy, intellectual property, power relationships) tend to be involved in ethical evaluation and justification of moral norms. In many cases they also aim to develop such norms in ways that are morally acceptable. Debates on the future of privacy protection, for example, tend to be based on ethical figures of thought on why we value privacy and how such values can best be reflected.

The problem that arises from the distinction between ethics and morality is that only one of them, namely morality, is open to empirical investigation. One can use established social science methods to find out which moral rules people find acceptable. There is a plethora of research doing just this. Privacy preferences or ways of dealing with intellectual property have been researched intensively. Such research can raise some problems. Questioning individuals on their attitude to intellectual property, for example, does not give strong evidence of actual behaviour. Research situations are highly artificial and it is less than likely that all respondents will answer questions truthfully. However, this is not a new problem and social sciences have looked at ways of coming to reliable and reproducible results that reflect social realities as they are perceived by respondents. Academic research can thus produce knowledge on morality.

Research can even go one step further than this and attempt to investigate ethical reasoning of respondents. Instead of just asking whether individuals are likely to respect intellectual property protection, the researcher can try to find out reasons for this behaviour. Again, there is much research that investigates why people state they believe their actions to be acceptable. Such research is valuable because it can provide insights into important questions such as why individuals in a
society follow certain norms and which ethical justifications are generally shared or which ones are more contentious.

The problem is that such research cannot make any statements concerning the legitimacy of either the moral rules or their ethical justification. Empirical research, by definition, cannot prescribe norms but can only describe them. A researcher can find out that an IS security specialist who is implementing employee surveillance finds this justified by economic considerations or she might find that the specialist refuses to implement such technology because it is perceived to be unacceptable intrusive. But this is the limit of the research. The researcher cannot say on the basis of her observations and interpretations which course of action the employee should follow.

There are nevertheless numerous examples of research doing just this. The researcher investigates a contentious ethical phenomenon, describes actions and stated justifications and from there suggests further courses of action. Such research is deficient because it fails to recognise the limits of empirical research. In order to provide normative conclusions (e.g. "management should implement an acceptable use policy to prevent employees from downloading files") further normative premises are required. These might take the form of "infringement of the current intellectual property regime is bad" (moral rule) based on a range of possible ethical justifications. It is of course possible to have such views but one needs to see that they cannot result from observation. Even a strong majority view on a particular moral issue does not provide an adequate ethical justification of a rule. For example, even if all respondents in a large-scale survey were to state that employee monitoring is acceptable, then this would not make it so. In return, a general rejection of employee monitoring would not guarantee its ethical unacceptability either. History gives us numerous examples of moral norms that were widely accepted in a particular society at a particular time whose ethical justification would be exceedingly problematic from any theoretical viewpoint currently debated in moral philosophy (e.g. slavery, cannibalism, marital rape,…).

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR CRIS

The problems of empirical research and ethics apply to any investigation of morally contentious issues. They are hugely exacerbated in cases where research is explicitly motivated by ethical concerns, as is the case for CRIS. A particular issue for CRIS is its implicit negation of the legitimacy of current practices. If change of the status quo and emancipation is the aim of CRIS, then the status quo is implicitly or explicitly perceived as bad. Investigating perceptions of the status quo will run into the problem that respondents will often not have considered alternatives and tend to view existing arrangements as legitimate, even where they are ostensibly not. A critical IS researcher may thus investigate certain practices in IS development and find that the people involved in them all find them morally acceptable. This can become a problem if the researcher does not deem them to be acceptable. In such cases emancipation may require the researcher to affect the subjects perceptions and beliefs. The researcher can run the risk of exchanging a current oppressive reality against an alternative one, which is equally oppressive, but originates from the critical researcher. This problem of the dictatorship of the intellectual has been an ongoing issue in critical research and has not yet been addressed in CRIS (Stahl, 2006).

But even if respondents and researcher agree on the description and ethical evaluation of a situation, the problem of critical research are not solved. Let us assume there is a consensus on the topic in question, e.g. that employee surveillance is morally bad and ethically impossible to justify. There still is the problem of where such research results are meant to lead. I have indicated in the preceding section that even a strong consensus on moral issues does not guarantee their ethical acceptability. Empirical research cannot tell the researchers what to do.

To some degree this is not too problematic for critical researchers because the fundamental tenets of critical research provide the ethical premises required to come to a normative solution. The concept of emancipation includes value judgments which can be used to guide the development of desirable rules or institutions. Emancipation implies that more freedom and an increased understanding of one's world and oneself are desirable. When applied to information systems the normative implications of critical research thus provide guidance. They give a good basis for critically investigating current power structures, in particular where these are oppressive to some members of
society. Such thoughts are easily applicable to information systems, which have the potential to be liberating and emancipating but equally have the potential to be hierarchical, inflexible, and oppressive. Much critical research in IS, in particular when based on Habermas's theory of communicative action plays with variations of this theme.

One problem for the critical researcher arises when the ethical implications of the critical approach are not borne out by empirical findings. The researcher may identify situations of oppression but the research subjects may not share this perception. The researcher may believe that wider responsibilities, better communication, more participation are appropriate whereas the subjects are happy performing a non-demanding task with no means of increased participation or influence.

Putting it differently, research subjects may prefer not to be emancipated. Another situation may be one where employees agree with emancipatory ideas but where management structures are opposed to it or where implementations are denied on the basis of economic considerations. In such cases the ethical implications of critical research are overwritten by business concerns. The problem here is that business concerns always include wider ethical considerations such as the efficiency of production, security of employment, provision of inexpensive goods of consumers, which may be very difficult to weight against the primary ethical concerns of emancipation.

Such situations will come as little surprise to critical researchers. Much traditional critical research has discussed similar problems. A central concept used to denote the recalcitrance of subjects to be emancipated has been discussed under the heading of "false consciousness". Mechanisms that reproduce structures where emancipation is not desired have been analysed using concepts such as "hegemony" or "ideology". Such problems and questions are arguably at the heart of critical research and there is nothing fundamentally wrong with them. The problems they raise with regards to the narrative of this paper have to do with empirical research. Empirical data cannot provide guidance on these issues. It cannot tell us what exactly emancipation is, how it can be implemented, why it should be implemented or how to overcome resistance to it. It can thus contribute little to the central concerns of critical research in IS.

5 CONCLUSION: EMPIRICAL AND CONCEPTUAL WORK

I do not wish to deny the legitimacy of empirical critical research. Being aware of people's perceptions concerning their state of emancipation or their desires for a better and more fulfilled life are important foundations for critical research. Debates about desirable states of the world require some knowledge of its current state. Even though empirical findings cannot tell us what is good and why it should be regarded as good, they can give us majority and minority views on these questions, which can further our understanding. Critical researchers need to understand, however, that the value of such findings for critical research as an activity aimed at promoting emancipation is limited.

The problem of the status of empirical work in critical theory is an old bone of contention. When the Frankfurt School was founded in the late 1920s one of its explicit aims was to underpin critical theory with empirical findings. This agenda was never truly fulfilled for a variety of reasons. One of them was arguably the intrinsic problems of empiricism in critical research described here.

The conclusion that many criticalists have drawn is to either concentrate on conceptual research or to move away from the scholarly domain and enter political debates and promote emancipation through political activism. Both are legitimate decisions. Unfortunately, they are both problematic in the field of information systems where empirical research is still the gold standard and required for publications in many recognised journals. The desired result of this paper will be to contribute to a discourse to re-evaluate this state of affairs. I hope that the argument here has shown that empirical research from a critical perspective is intrinsically problematic. It cannot give the answers that critical research seeks. I hope to have argued convincingly that this is logically consistently the case for CRIS.

However, I would venture further and argue that there are fundamental problems of empirical research that apply to other research approaches, be they positivist, interpretive, or anything else as well. Positivism or interpretivism do not have to contend with the same type of problems as CRIS because they lack the easily recognisable ethical quality of the approach. The history of philosophy
of science, ontology, or epistemology has nevertheless shown that there are many open questions and our conceptual apparatus is not developed to the degree that we can view them as solved or successfully addressed. The resulting plea of this paper is for a greater recognition of non-empirical work. There is clearly much conceptual research being published in IS but it is often disguised as empirical (by providing empirical examples of conceptual arguments) or it is deemed inferior to empirical research. I believe the community of IS scholars needs to overcome this view and should start to recognise the importance and validity non-empirical, mainly conceptual work. In many cases conceptual analyses and arguments are more important than empirical findings. One can argue that all empirical work must be based on conceptual decisions and discussing these should thus be at least as important as the subsequent collection, analysis and interpretation of data. The choice of critical theory as an increasingly recognised label of "social theory" in IS allows this argument to be made from a strong position. Within CRIS, as I have argued in this paper, there are good reasons for not privileging empirical over conceptual work. This paper should have contributed to an increased awareness of the relevance of conceptual research. To come back to Marx’s view expressed in the title, it should have shown that (intellectual) sexual intercourse is often overrated.

References