Critical Thinking in Social and Psychological Inquiry

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Yanchar, Slife, and their colleagues have described how mainstream psychology's notion of critical thinking has largely been conceived of as "scientific analytic reasoning" or "method-centered critical thinking." We extend here their analysis and critique, arguing that some version of the one-sided instrumentalism and confusion about tacit values that characterize scientistic approaches to inquiry also color phenomenological, critical theoretical, and social constructionist viewpoints. We suggest that hermeneutic/dialogical conceptions of inquiry, including the idea of social theory as itself a form of ethically motivated human practice, give a fuller account of critical thinking in the social disciplines.

The theoretical psychologists Steve Yanchar, Brent Slife, and their colleagues have reviewed the literature on critical thinking across many scholarly domains and analyzed its presence or absence in psychology in considerable detail (e.g., Yanchar, Slife, & Warne, 2008; Yanchar, Gantt, & Clay, 2005; Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005). Part of their conclusion is that psychology has been admirably committed to "scientific analytic reasoning" or "method-centered critical thinking" involving "the assiduous use of logical and methodological rules in the evaluation of evidence, arguments, and knowledge claims" (Yanchar, Slife, & Warne, 2008, pp. 1-2). As they note, however, this approach may leave many stones unturned. The tendency in mainstream psychology for decades, when this approach does not seem to yield up interesting or convincing results, has been merely to redouble our efforts in refining such rules or applying them more rigorously.[1]

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[1] Of course, if there is some basic flaw in your approach, you will never discover it that way. We might liken this approach to the effort of arguing vociferously one's spouse out of the belief that we are being too argumentative.

Brent Slife and Richard Williams (1995) made this point in their book *What's Behind the Research* in a way that students seem to find helpful. They suggest that the guiding principle behind much psychological theory and research seems to be that scientists test their ideas by their methods. But what if, they point out, methods <u>presuppose</u> certain important and consequential ideas? Then, we have no way to identify or evaluate those crucial assumptions, such as the very idea that understanding comes mainly <u>by</u> method.   There are, of course, many other pathways to understanding, such as inspiration, judgment, or creative imagination. Indeed, the idea of a sharp split between facts and values grants cultural and moral values some functional role as "subjective" factors in the behavioral equation but denies them any moral force or validity as a pathway to the real or "objective" world.

These authors have outlined a more probing approach to critical thinking in psychology carefully defined as "the identification and evaluation of ideas, particularly implicit assumptions and values, that guide the thinking, decisions, and practices of oneself and others" (Yanchar, Slife, & Warne, 2008, p. 6). Moreover, they view this critical activity as itself culturally-embedded, "perspectival, relational, and interpretive" (p. 1), so that there are no easy or final answers to what critical thinking is or the results of thinking critically. Indeed, a great deal of the theoretical and philosophical psychology of the last few decades has concentrated on unearthing and critically sifting these implicit assumptions and values. Yanchar et al.'s (2008) analysis applies across the field but has concentrated on traditional, method-centered, empiricism in psychology. In this paper, we would like to suggest some ways this approach applies to other types of inquiry.

Instrumentalism

Critical thinking in method-centered psychology is not limited, however, to rigorous if narrow "scientific analytic reasoning." Thomas McCarthy (1978, p. 5) points out that, according to Habermas, modern positivist philosophy is powered by a "positivist critique of ideology" in full "continuity with the tradition of the Enlightenment." It is animated by "commitment to the centuries-old battle of reason against all forms of ignorance, superstition, and dogmatism" and to "the liberation of mankind from internal and external compulsions whose power derived in large part from their nontransparency." In some form, these are ideals we all share, one would hope. That doesn't mean this rather one-sided and negatively defined sort of <u>anti</u>-authoritarianism and <u>anti</u>-mystification is anything like a sufficient credo for personal or social life. Also, as McCarthy notes, there is the nasty little problem that it is "not at all clear how this commitment can itself be justified on positivist premises." Be that as it may, we suggest that all approaches to social inquiry contain not just an understanding of critical thinking but a distinctive, even if implicit, moral vision (Christopher, 1996) and critique of ideology or false values, as well.

At the base of positivism's implicit critique of ideology is a view of human action as essentially <u>instrumental</u>. In his recent book *Virtue Ethics and Psychology: Pursuing Excellence in Ordinary Practices*, the theoretical psychologist Blaine Fowers (2005) documents the extent to which instrumentalism pervades the field of psychology, imposing the idea of a sharp separation between means and ends in human activity, with ends or goals in living chosen <u>subjectively</u> and most human action portrayed in terms of "strategies, methods, or techniques that are directed toward reaching a goal" (p. 56). He identifies two key features of the instrumental account. One is that there is "no necessary connection between one's goal and the means one adopts" to reach it, so the means can be discarded at no cost if another strategy turns out to be more effective or efficient. The other is that an individual or group's "strategic

expertise in reaching their goals" is strictly "independent of the kinds of persons they are," of their ethical quality or character (ibid.).

Fowers (2005) notes that the instrumental perspective appears to "leave…questions of goods and values to the individual," thus freeing researchers and therapists to focus on…value-neutral "causal connections and strategies" to reach those goods and values. That is why ideas like "health," "effectiveness," "functional," and "well-being" function in this value-neutral, almost like god-terms in most of psychology. But he, like a lot of us nowadays, doubts that such value-neutrality is either possible or desirable. For one thing, he insists that "instrumentalism is itself an ethical framework because it dictates that choices of values and goals should be left to individuals" (p. 58). Merely to claim that value-neutral strategies are what you seek to "maximize" (another one of those god-terms) puts your moral or social aims beyond question or doubt. Once again though, we have the problem that it is hard to see how instrumentalism's ethical framework or moral vision could be justified on instrumentalist premises.

Fowers (2005) points out that the instrumentalist's aims in living are largely restricted to what might be termed "external goods," such as wealth, power, prestige, or various pleasures, comforts, and satisfactions, which are the separate outcome of some activity, held as possessions by individuals. Their supply is usually limited, and they are typically objects of competition. What instrumentalism seems to miss, he suggests, is "internal goods" that are qualitatively different and have a certain "primacy" in human life. They set the wider purposes that are served by instrumental activity and its goals, like the erection of a beautiful building is served by sound and efficient construction practices. Otherwise, control becomes an end in itself and often tends to spin "out of control." They reflect a different kind of purpose and are found meaningful in a different way than external goods. One can attain "internal goods only by acting in the ways that

embody those goods." Be it spending unstructured time with a child or friend, acting

courageously without certainty about the outcome, creating or appreciating fine art, doing

volunteer work in a hospice, or practicing meditation or contemplative prayer, the activity is felt

to be good and is enjoyed for its own sake, not undertaken to reach any other outcome or

product. One can attain "internal goods only by acting in the ways that embody those goods" (p.

65). Means cannot be separated from ends because they are "experienced as central to

constituting a particular way of life" (Guignon, 1993, p. 230). So, for example, learning to set

firm limits on a child while causing a minimum of guilt or discouragement, or to forgive others

in a wholehearted manner when at all possible, or to detect vanity or envy in oneself and dissolve

or transform the emotions involved can't be accomplished by taking a pill or applying some

neutral technique. One has to really do it, i.e., cultivate, with the help of others, the excellences

of character involved, seen as worthwhile, decent, or good for their own sake (Fowers, 2005, p.

69).

"Descriptivisms"

Many approaches to social inquiry do not overtly participate in these aspects of instrumentalism.

Richard Bernstein usefully labels as "descriptivist" approaches to social inquiry like

phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and a number of kinds of qualitative research. The

philosopher of social science Peter Winch (1977) perhaps captures the essence of many such

methods with his idea that we elucidate human actions by discerning and describing their

motives, reasons, or goals, in terms that must be at least congruent with the meanings and norms

with which the social actors studied understand themselves. Then, we further explain these

reasons and purposes by describing the intersubjective rules, standards, or stories that structure the wider "form of life" or "form of rationality" of which they are an expression or part.

Such approaches are obviously less individualistic, reductionistic, and instrumentalist than traditional, method-centered psychology. But they may unknowingly retain some elements of the positivist outlook they commonly condemn. Often, they seem to aspire to a thoroughly accurate and unbiased account as the only road to "truth," not fully reckoning with the fact every description is highly <u>selective</u>, very much an <u>interpretation</u> of events, and an interpretation that inevitably reflects an <u>evaluation</u> of these events in line with the concerns and commitments of the investigator and his or her community.

This aspiration to a strong kind of objectivity also turns out to contain a largely surreptitious critique of ideology, and thus a kind of weak instrumentalism. Winch (1958, p. 103) indicates this with his claim that by studying our own or other cultures we seek to gain "wisdom" from exposure to "new possibilities of good and evil, in relation to which people may come to terms with life." It is a moving statement. But Bernstein (1976, p. 74) observes that "such a 'wisdom' tends to be empty "unless it also provides some critical basis for evaluating these 'new possibilities of good and evil.' Certainly we can recognize that there are forms of life which are dehumanizing and alienating, and to remain uncommitted undermines any rational basis for...a critique of society."

There remains a certain amount of individualism and instrumentalism in descriptivist approaches. We might ask, what is the implication as to how someone would appropriate such 'new possibilities of good and evil" as a social actor? It would seem likely to be some form of "expressive individualism" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1985; MacIntyre, 1981), in which individuals first (1) get in touch with their goals or ideals in an inward, relatively

private fashion and then second (2) implement them in a social world that serves at best a secondary role in facilitating or impeding those aims. It is left unclear how to distinguish worthy from unworthy personal inclinations, and internal goods that are shared with others in more or less excellent practices, considered good for their own sake, are greatly obscured.

Critical Social Science

The so-called "critical turn" effected by The Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas wrestles profoundly with the problems of instrumentalism and represents, in our view, a tremendous advance in social theory. These thinkers insist we have to move beyond mere description of social life to "critique of ideology," to analyzing the ways puzzling inconsistencies in human behavior, always there to be found, can reflect systematic distortions in the self-understanding of social actors, deriving from ways they have repressed or rationalized their accommodations to force or threat by powerful or intimidating others.

On a larger scale, critical theory's famous "critique of instrumental reason" invites us to reconsider a massive blind spot of modern society itself. It is just what we have called instrumentalism, including a failure to appreciate internal goods, in the experience of which the means of living are constituent parts of exemplary, worthy, or excellent social practices. In Habermas' (1991, p. 294 ff.) version of this critique, human action is most fundamentally "communicative" in nature," governed by consensual norms, which define reciprocal obligations about behavior," not by "technical rules" applied to produce desired results or outcomes where any means will do so long as it is effective or efficient. From this failure to appreciate the ascendancy of *praxis* over *techne,* Habermas deduces many of the personal and political pathologies of modern life.

Habermas, especially, drives home the point that we can't be value-neutral if we are sincerely interested in justice! We have to have some way to assess the validity of the norms or claims to rightness that structure our *praxis*, our social life. It is impossible here to do more than hint at his creative but likely flawed solution to this matter. Habermas (1975) argues that we can and should discuss these norms and values following the particular pattern of a certain "ideal speech situation" (ISS), where we seek a consensus about issues of justice or rightness through discourse involving such things as full accountability to one another for the quality of our reasoning, arguing as many different points of view as possible in the search for a valid consensus, and the exclusion of "all motives except that of the cooperative search for truth." This makes ideology-free consensus possible. Social theory and research, in this view, are <u>part</u> of this ongoing discourse, not a purely "objective" inquiry that stands about the human fray.

This approach, it seems to us, does begin to illuminate the sort of constructive conversation we have to have with one another about such issues. However, as a largely "procedural" or "formalist" (Taylor, 1985a) process in the tradition of Kant, focusing mainly on the "how" rather than the "what" of ethical reasoning or debate, even if it is a richly dialogical version of this process, it does not seem sufficient to cope with the more predatory inclinations of humans toward nature and one another. Moreover, it appears to have a fatal philosophical flaw in that it <u>builds</u> <u>into</u> the guidelines of the ideal speech situation a distinctively modern moral outlook that cannot itself be debated <u>in</u> that situation. For example, a Buddhist thinker might argue that achieving much in the way of justice was possible only for people who had gained insight into the connection between attachment and suffering, seen the importance of mindful living, and achieved some degree of understanding themselves as an "empty self." Right or

wrong (for what is worth, we think there is something to it), there is no way to discuss this claim in the ideal speech situation.

Academic or professional psychologists with a social justice orientation are commonly viewed as arbitrarily injecting their preferred moral outlook into their work rather than remaining appropriately value-neutral, or at least tolerant and non-judgmental. This view echoes the concern expressed fifty years ago by the distinguished researcher Paul Meehl (1959), who worried that unless counselors and therapists adhered to a strict value-neutrality they would behave like "crypto-missionaries" (p. 257) seeking to convert their clients to their own preferred cultural, moral, or religious values. But these critics fail to appreciate that they interpret their findings and therapy clients from a tacit moral vision of their own, often of an instrumentalist sort, which has serious difficulties of its own. Instead, we would recommend that rather than cordon off their ethical commitments, social justice thinkers broaden the dialogue about them (Harrist & Richardson, 2010). We need to acknowledge that there are other moral excellences, virtues, or internal goods that carry the same sort of weight as justice, such as forgiveness, compassion, modesty or humility, courage, loyalty, perhaps the ability to cope with or find meaning in suffering (Richardson & Nelson, 2010), and so forth, that are emphasized in varying ways and degrees by different societies and communities. Also, we need to recognize that more or less peaceful, more or less constructive dialogue about such goods is about substantive ends in living, not merely about effectiveness or procedural fairness, a rather confusing and exacting situation with which it is difficult to cope.

For example, the theoretical psychologist Thomas Teo (2008) outlines an attractive "critical-hermeneutic" approach to empirical psychology. Teo contends that any interpretation of research findings always involves an "interpretive" or "speculative" dimension that gives them

an ethical meaning and force of one kind or another. He then argues that such interpretation, at times, incorporates a kind of "epistemological violence" that subtly constructs the "Other" as problematic or inferior and provides several examples of this kind of unacknowledged, morally consequential bias. This approach weds dialogue to ethical commitment in admirable fashion. It neither gives up on commitment to the substantive pursuit of justice nor just arbitrarily asserts a particular justice standpoint. Rather, it seeks to render itself plausible to others through careful interpretation and continuing dialogue that may confirm, correct, or refine this view over time. Our only suggestion is that it seems important, even urgent now, to bring other kinds of moral, existential, and possibly religious perspectives into this conversation, for reasons we hope to hint at in this paper.

Postmodern/Social Constructionist Theory

Obviously, this situation of differing or clashing substantive ends and internal goods, with no easy way to adjudicate among them(i.e., the collapse of the ideal speech situation)seems to invite the frank relativism of many varieties of postmodern or social constructionist views today. There is simply no time to discuss this option responsibly in this short paper (see Slife & Richardson, in press a; in press b). These views have the virtue of stressing the deep embeddedness of human action and identity in historical and cultural contexts. But they also seem, rather paradoxically, to view this embeddedness from an impossibly distant vantage point, almost as if the viewers of the embeddedness are not themselves embedded, a kind of god's-eye point of view, representing an austere kind of "descriptivism" (Slife & Richardson, in press a).

      This approach tends to deny the possibility of any genuine gain in ethical insight or understanding from interplay or dialogue among differing moral visions. Maybe so. But, again,

we detect an implausible residue of modern instrumentalism, of all things, in these ostensibly postmodern philosophies. At times, such thinkers will advocate that we can choose between such visions and values on the basis of their "pragmatic" implications or their capacity to "enrich our potentials for living" (Gergen, 1985; 2009; Rorty, 1982; 1985). The trouble is, what we even mean by "pragmatic implications" or "enriching potentials" will depend on the moral vision we already inhabit! These value systems are not so readily commensurable. This approach amounts to treating what we have called "internal goods," in which the means of realizing them are constituent of the ends sought, as extrinsic results or payoffs, which is something different altogether.

However, it is clear that such postmodern views, as well, are powered by a certain kind of critique of ideology. It may amount to throwing out all ethical commitments (or trying to) in order to undermine false or stultifying ethical commitments, a highly questionably strategy. But this approach does seriously mean to free us from dogmatism and domination in order to improve and enrich human life.

Hermeneutic/Dialogical Viewpoints

Yanchar, et al.'s (2008) notion of critical activity as itself culturally-embedded, "perspectival, relational, and interpretive" may receive its fullest expression in hermeneutic philosophy (Gadamer, 1989; Taylor, 1989) and related philosophies of dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; MacIntyre, 1984). For these approaches, critique or critique of ideology means open-minded and open-ended participation in the search for understanding and ethical orientation that lies at the heart of the human struggle itself. In broad terms, it seems hard to improve upon Alasdair MacIntyre's (1984) description of this search as a "quest" that is "not at all…a search for something already

adequately characterized…but always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge" (p. 219).

The result of this quest, at any point of time, is a kind of "dialogic understanding" (Warnke, 1987). Thus, Charles Taylor (2002) argues that in both everyday life and human science inquiry "understanding a text or event which comes to us out of our history should be construed, not on the model of the 'scientific' grasp of an object, but rather on the model of speech-partners who come to an understanding" (p. 126). The end or goal, in Taylor's words, is "being able in some way to function together with the partner" (p. 128). On the one hand, we harbor self-defining beliefs and values concerning things we care about greatly in this dialogue; we even have a "deep identity investment," sometimes in "distorted images we cherish of others" (p. 141). On the other hand, since our ideals and our images of others and events are always partial or distorted in some way, we need not just compromise or go-along-to-get-along with others, but to <u>learn</u> <u>from</u> the past, others, or other cultures. Thus, we <u>depend</u> upon them greatly in matters closest to our own hearts and minds. This is a demanding and often taxing situation that may entail a deeply personal, sometimes painful "identity cost" (p. 141).

In this view of mutual influence and dialogue, human animals never merely prefer or desire certain pleasures or results. Even if only tacitly or unconsciously, they always make "strong evaluations" (Taylor, 1985b, p. 3), i.e., they evaluate the <u>quality</u> of their desires and motivations and the <u>worth</u> of the ends they seek in terms of how they fit in with their overall sense of a decent or worthwhile life. However, there is no way <u>first</u> to identify appropriate criteria of worth and <u>then</u> subsequently apply them in reflection or behavior. Any fresh appreciation of what is worthwhile and whatever criteria that involves emerge <u>together</u> from the risky adventure of mutual influence and dialogue, over the outcome of which we have little

control, which is full of unexpected disappointments and rewards. How could it be otherwise, given what we know from experience about the twists and turns of politics, cultural developments, and human relationships? That may be why Hegel wrote, "The owl of Minerva [wisdom] flies only at dusk." In Gadamer's words at the end of *Truth and Method*, in this process of coming-to-understanding "we are drawn into a happening of truth and come, as it were, too late if we want to know what we should believe."

Two final thoughts about this particular view of critical understanding as a kind of lived (and shared) process. First, it raises the important question as to how we can gain the distance or leverage needed to critically evaluate our moral ideals and internal goods, including the presence of dogmatism or domination, when there is "no possibility of stepping outside the flux of history to obtain a purely objective perspective" (Fowers, 2005, p. 31), and no ability to question all our assumptions at once? The dialogical view might afford a way to <u>both</u> appreciate deep human limitations <u>and</u> encourage thorough-going ethical critique. Cultural and moral values are "multivocal and dynamic" and "tend to resist precise formulation" (Fowers, 2005, p. 31). Unless our cultural traditions are dogmatically hardened into what might be termed "traditionalism," living traditions, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) suggests, might be characterized as the "temporal extension of an argument." There are always tensions among our highest ideals and diverse, never fully harmonized diverse interpretations of them. Moreover, they always require reinterpretation in the face of unique situations and unexpected challenges. Open and honest dialogue and reinterpretation of this sort, in the teeth of a clash of moral visions or treasured <u>ends</u> in living may be what most fully can bring underlying assumptions to light and can compel a searching reevaluation of them. Of course, the same searching re-examination should extend to mutual influence and dialogue <u>across</u> traditions when new ones are encountered. This ongoing,

living process of critique might greatly improve the approach of much modern psychology, which tends currently to <u>assume</u> the correctness of some particular modern ideology and then abruptly label any contrasting ideals as illiberal, oppressive, or inauthentic.

Finally, we should note that this hermeneutic/dialogical approach to critical understanding has the distinctive and radical implication that social and psychological theory and research should themselves be understood as a "form of practice." In the natural sciences, theories are in an important way about "independent objects." There, according to Taylor (1985c, p.101 ff.), the "relation of knowledge to practice is that one applies what one knows about causal powers to particular cases, but the truths about such causal powers that one banks on are thought to remain unchanged." By contrast, in social inquiry "accepting a theory can itself transform what that theory bears on." Theory in this domain is not external to practices it may influence but "transforms its own object." In other words, there is an intimate relationship of mutual shaping or co-constitution between theory and the practice it is about, as in a conversation between two parties. Theories "can undermine, strengthen, or shape the practice they bear on" because they "are theories about practices, which…are partly constituted by certain self understandings." So, to "the extent that theories [or the interpretation of research findings] transform this self-understanding, they undercut, bolster, or transform the constitutive features of practices" (p. 101). For example, they may shed new and surprising light on how those practices and institutions actually operate, or on their moral implications in terms of their ethical quality or consequences.

From this perspective, when we fully appreciate the fact that social theory and research are themselves a form of practice, we have arrived at the Mecca, so to speak, of critical thinking and the critique of ideology, finally dispensing with uncritical instrumentalism. We are just one

voice, and one kind of voice, among others in the conversation of humankind. In that process, we can neither escape self-defining conclusions about what is truly worthwhile in living nor attain any kind of finality or certainty about them.

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