Chapter 13 Applied Critical Theory

Chapter Outline

I. Introduction
   A. There are many examples of social inequities across the globe related to the distribution of wealth, health care, criminal justice policies

II. Related Dialects, Associated Schools of Thought
   A. Emancipatory theory is a broad category for theories intended to raise consciousness and emancipate people from oppressive conditions
   B. Critical theorists are associated with the Frankfurt School in Germany, were influenced by Karl Marx, criticize capitalist ideology and theorize about the manipulation of the media by powerful groups
   C. Conflict theorists are concerned with the prevalence of competition and strife in social life
   D. Liberation theorists draw from the teachings of Christ to promote progressive change
   E. Progressive theorists recognize the prevalence of conflict and inequality but reject violent and revolutionary change strategies, prefer democratic and cooperative change processes
   F. Radical theorists call for a substantial change of society not gradual reform
   G. Structural theorists focus on the contribution of
   H. Other empowerment theorists include feminist theories, Afrocentric theories, and queer theories

III. Applied Critical Theory: Exemplary Models
   A. Introduction: Jesus Christ as critical theorist who attempted to bring about revolutionary social and spiritual change
   B. Jurgen Habermas an important German philosopher who appreciated American traditions of pragmatism and interactionism, analyzed the crisis of modern society, and focus on the ingredients of liberating communication and the importance of communication to democracy
   C. Wright Mills was an angry and radical sociologist who linked personal troubles to public policies, analyzed the dynamics of social stratification and power, and promoted theories and policies that would increase the accountability of the elite to the entire society
   D. Bertha Capen Reynolds was a social work educator and practitioner who integrated Marxist theories into the Freudian approach to social work. She advocated for major change in political and economic institutions, and urged social workers to unionize, to work with labor groups, to engage in social action

IV. Applied Critical Theory: Root Metaphors
   A. The social environment as factory (Marxism) and public forum (Habermas)
      1. Society is like a factory (of hundred years ago, and factories today in some parts of US and countries that work for US Corporations including meat processing factories and clothing production factories) characterized by
         a. Dismal, dangerous, hazardous
         b. Workers struggle while owners become rich
         c. Long hours of labor
2. Society is like a public forum with contending groups fighting to define reality and control media
   a. Forum can be open and inclusive and rational like New England town meeting
   b. More often forum is controlled by elite who regulate topic selection, who speaks and what opinions prevail

B. The person as combatant and debater
   1. As a combatant; the privileged beat on the workers. Workers are underdogs fighting for wealth and other resources including basic necessities
   2. As a debater, the elite control media and topic selection while progressive citizens argue for democratic forms of public communication and for fair policies. Clients are often ignored in the debates

C. The social worker is like a strategist and critic
   1. Social worker is a strategist like the union organizer fighting on behalf of exploited workers, and working to better tactics and actions necessary to achieve justice
   2. Social worker is like a critic examining and judging societal values and practices in terms of their contribution to social, economic, and political justice for all

V. Core Assumptions of Applied Critical Theory
   A. The structural analysis of problems is preferred
      1. This approach focuses on social structures as major source of problem not individual failings (Images of non structural approaches: elephants fight and destroy individual blades of grass but worker attempts to repair each blade; trying to pull drowning people out as they float down river instead of dealing with person pushing them in)
   B. Conflict characterizes social life
      1. Conflict and contention are most common not cooperation and consensus especially in societies with capitalist economies. Many fights deal with the definition of public problems and their solutions
   C. Societies are divided into two major groups
      1. The powerful and privileged group who seek to dominate
      2. The relatively powerless group with few privileges or opportunities who are oppressed
   D. Social workers should protect oppressed groups
      1. Social workers can’t be neutral but must fight against injustice and for justice
      2. Social workers should grapple with contradictions of profession (paid by elite to subdue poor, yet the profession claims that it advocates for the poor, for example)
   E. The countersystem method guides inquiry and practice
      1. Critical theorists search for countercultures and alternative possible arrangements and agencies that will realize the potentials of all community members

VI. The Critical-Feminist Approach to Human Development
   A. Carol Gilligan: exemplary role model challenged male-oriented models of human development, theorized in ways that included the female voice; explored human development, moral reasoning, and educational practices using this feminist slant
   B. Assumptions
      1. The personal is political
2. Gender is the most important and influential membership category (Critical theorists nominate social class), and females are constrained by gender stereotypes across the life span and in all spheres of activity.

3. The experiences of women and other marginal groups have been neglected by most developmental theorists.

C. Root metaphors
   1. Voice – the female voice has been silenced, and feminist theorists study how this silencing has occurred, the effects of the silencing, and the methods to reclaim voice.
   2. Marginality – men have the power and occupy the center places in society while women and other vulnerable groups are forced to the margins.

D. The critical-feminist model of human development
   1. Includes theoretical constructs
      a. Oppressive social contexts for development where women have little power, status, or access to other resources. Most societies are patriarchal, controls by the fathers.
      b. Asymmetrical interaction suggests that power differences are manifested in face to face interaction and men act without sensitivity or attentiveness to women. Men use devaluing forms of speech towards women. Men treat women as invisible. These patterns are operative across female’s life span.
      c. Internalization of subordination – during development, females are pressure to internalize the beliefs, values, and norms associated with female inferiority and often do so with resultant self doubt and esteem problems.
      d. Coping options – oppressive contexts and socialization practices create females who are often alienated from the true self, from meaningful interaction, and from public organizations. Female’s ability to use effective and flexible coping responses is inhibited, and coping problems across the life span are common.

E. Critical comments
   1. Feminists have not extended their theorizing to form a comprehensive biopsychosocial model of human development.
   2. Feminists may simplify social reality by dividing society into oppressed and oppressor. Social actors are influenced by multiple and intersecting memberships.

F. Applications
   2. Gilligan’s work has been widely applied to moral education and to care activities.

VII. Mapping Applied Critical Theory
   A. Figure 13.1: A Critical Theory Eco-Map
   B. Applied Critical Theory Translations
      1. How are connections conceptualized?
         a. Deliberation, decision, and action by citizens creates a linguistic bond.
      2. How is the quality of connections differentiated?
         a. Positive - open, authentic, democratic, symmetrical communication; meets validity claims of truth, correctness, sincerity.
         b. Negative – distorted, autocratic, intimidating asymmetrical communication.
         c. Tenuous – limited access to communication opportunities, citizens left out of political deliberations.
3. What is the typical unit of attention or focal system?
   a. Citizens with rights and obligations related to the common good; as potentially active participants in democratic processes

4. How is the environment conceptualized?
   a. As spheres of influence including
      1. The public sphere – forums for public discussion and decision making
      2. The private sphere – family and the workplace
      3. The oppositional or alternative spheres – places with groups can mobilize to seek justice and power like consciousness raising groups

5. Is particular emphasis given to any systems?
   a. The power elite, influential members of military, corporate, and political organizations
   b. Cultural industries, the organizations that control the production and distribution of cultural products

6. How are resources and their flow conceptualized?
   a. Resources
      1. Political power
      2. Communicative power and skills
   b. The flow of resources controlled by elite and is often one way

7. What descriptive words are used?
   a. The terminology of democratic political theory and of Marxist revolutionaries

8. How is change conceptualized?
   a. Non violent revolution, planned opposition to elite and dominant culture by
      1. Confrontational politics
      2. Political education
      3. Mobilization of social movements
      4. Labor organizing

9. How are actual and ideal eco-maps contrasted?
   a. Ideal – egalitarian, power sharing communities, where there is a provision of basic freedoms and rights to all, and interaction is democratic, compassionate, and characterized by open communication. Includes
      1. Mutual help groups
      2. Labor cooperatives
      3. Responsible citizens with fully developed communicative capacities
   b. Actual eco-map
      1. A public sphere controlled by the power elite
      2. The flight of most individuals to the private sphere of consumption and political passivity

10. How are issues of diversity, color and shading addressed?
    a. Priority to differences in power and privilege and impact on life chances and protection from risks
      1. Membership in ethnic and racial groups influences access and vulnerability
      2. Gender with women dealing with less power
      3. Sexual orientation and homosexuals facing discrimination and exclusion
    b. Intersecting categories of oppression
      1. Groups oppressed because of race, gender, and class for example
    c. Theorizing about the politics of difference and political action by victims of oppression
    d. The “Doing Gender” perspective
e. The effects of a male supremacist society on males

11. What would be added or deleted?
   a. Elite groups
   b. Mass media

VII. The Limits of Applied Critical Theory: A Social Work Appraisal
   A. Underestimates positive contribution of capitalism
   B. Some theorists minimize the ethical issues associated with calls for violence
   C. Uses a simplified division of society into two groups
   D. Tends toward determinism and pessimism

VIII. The Applied Critical Theory Model of Justice Work
   A. Display 13.1: Democratic Deliberation in the Public Sphere
   B. Critical theory conception of problem – democracy’s potentials are unrealized because of injustice and inequality
   C. Critical theory assessment:
      1. Location in the social hierarchy
      2. Communication capacities and conditions (right of access, right to speak, right to develop communicative capacities)
      3. Communication processes – distorted or non-distorted
      4. Quality of public problem solving – coerced or consensual
   D. Critical theory intervention: fostering democracy
      1. By protecting forums for public deliberation
      2. By engaging citizens in politics
      3. By increasing capacities of citizens for public deliberation and decision
      4. By forming and supporting alternative public spheres