The Ethics of Critical IS Research

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Abstract:
This position paper argues that critical research is based on ethical concerns. Critical research is concerned with power and emancipation and intends to change the state of affairs. These three aspects are reasonable only when based on ethical assumptions. Critical IS research, while ethical in nature, rarely reflects on its ethical roots. The resulting lack of clarity of the ethical basis of critical research threatens its theoretical and practical viability. In order to overcome this problem, critical research needs to reflect on its ethical origin and acknowledge the work undertaken concerning the ethical questions of the individual and organisational use of information and communication technology.

Key words:
critical research, ethics, Frankfurt school, realisability

1 Introduction

This paper argues that critical research is ethically motivated. The two main concerns critical researchers tend to be interested in, emancipation and power, can only gain their special interest because of their ethical importance. If this is true, then the question arises how critical research reflects on its ethical foundations. The paper will briefly discuss some of the ethical issues that arise for critical researchers. The most important problem reviewed in this paper will be the question of realisability. If critical research is ethical research that tries to make a difference in the lives of the people who are investigated, then it will have to reflect on whether or how it makes a difference. This will then feed back into a critique of critical research. Critical research as ethical research has the problem of assessing the outcome of its investigation and of judging the success of critical activities.

The paper will conclude with a discussion of how critical research can address these points of criticism.

2 Critical Research

What is critical research? In a general sense, research is critical when it tries to find weak spots in theories and their consequences (Popper 1980). However, the term usually denotes a more specific understanding of research. Critical research is interested in prevailing social and power structures and aims at emancipating and empowering its human research subjects and (Brooke 2002; Hirschheim & Klein 1994). The terms "critical research" or "critical theory" usually describe approaches to science and humanities that see themselves in the Marxist tradition. There is a shared scepticism whether capitalist social systems can cater to human needs and whether social structures are conducive to the individual and common good. An underlying assumption is that all history is the history of class struggles (Marx 1969). This perception of social reality is an important building block of critical research that can be found in at least some of the narratives of critical research (Hirschheim & Klein 1989). Most contemporary scholars doing critical IS research would probably not describe themselves as Marxists. However, it is important to be aware of the historical roots of critical research in order to understand its aims and also, in this paper, its ethical intention.

An important aspect of critical research, which can be deduced directly from its Marxist heritage is that it aims to make a practical difference. Marx was disappointed by the inability of philosophy to address current issues. He therefore coined the frequently used statement that philosophy only interprets the world, but that it is important to change it (Marx 1964). This idea that philosophers and researchers in general should change social

reality has been a founding moment of the Frankfurt School, whose original intention was to use empirical research as a basis of social change.

3 Critical Research in IS

Critical research in IS generally follows the same aims as critical research in general, namely to bring restrictive and alienating conditions to light and to be emancipatory (Klein & Myers 1999). One can distinguish between critical topic, critical theories, and critical methods. Research into critical topics aims to expose the weaknesses and contradictions within the field. The topics in question can be problems of IS, such as systems failure or resistance to systems (Wilson 2003). Critical topics tend to be close to the interest of critical research and thus address questions of power, empowerment and emancipation (Lyytinen & Hirschheim 1988; Ulrich 2001; Cecez-Kecmanovic 2001;). These questions can gain importance in any number of IS application, from IS education (Dawson & Newman 2002) to virtual teams (Levary & Niederman 2003). They can concentrate on social problems such as the digital divide (Kvasny & Trauth 2003) or on the individual aspect where questions of personality or authenticity are discussed (Probert 2002).

The approach to these critical topics is usually supported by the use of critical theories. While there are a number of theoretical starting points which are critical in name or intention, such as critical realism (Mingers 2001), the most frequently used theoretical approach in critical IS research seems to be based on Jürgen Habermas's writings (Brooke 2002). Critical topics, addressed through the use of critical theories, require certain approaches, which one can call critical methodologies. These are critical in that they involve the researcher and aim to change social realities. This is typically the case for action research (Gergen 1999) but can also be true for others such as ethnomethodology or

most other non-positivist methodologies. An important group of critical methodologies are those based on social constructionism and the importance of discourses. Here we find methodologies such as a more theoretical discourse analysis (Schultze & Leidner 2002) or practical work with discourses (Hirschheim & Klein 1994; Ulrich 2001)

4 Critical Research as Ethical Research

The central thesis of this position paper is that critical research is ethical research. That means that researchers who do critical research are motivated by ethical reasons. The most important observation supporting this thesis is that critical research is normative. It tries to change social reality, to make a practical difference. Many have believed since Hume that normative statements cannot be deduced from empirical ones. Social research cannot on its own inform whether or in which way things should change. For this we need additional normative assumptions. This is the ethics that critical research is implicitly or explicitly built upon. The argument is not new. It started with regards to Marx. Marx's orthodox interpretation held that he was not interested in ethics but described the world in a scientific way. His texts often support this, for example when he exculpates individuals for social developments (Marx 1998). On the other hand, Marxism has been described as a "moral theory" (Vallance 1992, 40). It can be read as an expression of hope for a just society (Rorty 1998).

The two main areas of interest of critical research, power and emancipation, are intrinsically ethical. While power is not necessarily unethical (Giddens 1984; Rawls 2001), it is nevertheless true that the "exercise of power always raises ethical issues" (Mason et al. 1995, xvi). For IS researchers this is relevant because in capitalist societies power is largely hidden and distributed according to economic criteria (Galbraith 1998) and because

information is gaining in importance as a means of wielding power. Similarly, the problems of empowerment, emancipation, or alienation, are only of relevance because of their ethical status. These concepts affect the individual's ability to act, to perceive the world, to think and to see himself or herself. Why do we care about them? Because these questions are a root problem of ethics. They affect our view of the person, of individual and collective utility, of virtue and obligation, of autonomy. Finally, the two main points of interest for the critical researcher, power and emancipation, are closely linked and their relationship affects ethical considerations.

My argument is now that critical research is motivated by and based on ethical considerations but that these ethical considerations are rarely made clear and reflected upon. This lack of clarity produces serious problems for critical research which will be discussed for the rest of the paper.

5 Realisability as an Ethical Problem of Critical IS Research

The critique of critical IS research in this paper is that it is motivated by ethical concerns but rarely reflects on these ethical underpinnings. This charge is applicable to different topics, theories, and methodologies in different degrees. Using a Habermasian framework, for example, implies the consideration of ethics. Action research, on the other hand, can be conducted without overt ethical background. If this charge is true then it produces a host of problems. These include the question which moral norms are to be justified by which ethical theory. Other related questions are whether an instrumental use of critical theory is possible and whether one can realise critical research from within a capitalist system. In this paper I just want to discuss one specific example of these problems, namely the question of realisability. Realisability is a salient problem for critical research because it

goes to the central tenet of wanting to change reality. Realisability is also an interesting ethical problem because ethical theories rarely reflect on it despite its arguable importance for most ethical theories.

While critical research does not usually reflect expressly on its ethics, some of the underlying ethics can be deduced. The concentration on power and empowerment usually implies that the ethics of critical research is consequentialist and individualist. It is consequentialist because the consequences of action or social structures, namely alienation and disempowerment, are at the centre of attention. While consequentialism thus seems to be a natural characteristic of critical research, individualism is less intrinsic. However, power is often seen to be rooted in structures but linked to individuals. Similarly, emancipation is an individual problem because it is the individual, albeit in social structures, who is disempowered. Critical research, by definition, aims to change social realities, usually by improving the individual's lot. The lack of ethical reflection raises the twin problems theoretical and practical realisability. Theoretical realisability is concerned with the question of what the intended end state of critical research should look like from a theoretical point of view. If critical research aims to produce more just power relationships and help individuals emancipate themselves, then it should give criteria which would allow the judgment of different states. This is a normative problem and thus not subject to objective observation. Any description of desirable end states of critical research thus requires explicit recurrence to ethical reasoning.

Second, there is practical realisabiltiy. Even if it were theoretically clear how reality should be changed, critical research as a consequentialist approach should reflect on how these states can be achieved in practice. If critical research is measured by the success in bringing about change, then the questions are: how is change measured (cf. theoretical

problem), how can the influence of critical scholars on this change be assessed, and what is the evaluation of critical research that does not produce immediate change?

Again, these problems are not fundamentally new, as they go to the heart of critical research. In critical IS research, however, they seem not to be discussed yet, which can be understood as a serious deficiency.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that critical IS research is based on ethics but that it does not usually admit to this ethical motivation. The resulting lack of clarity and transparency is problematic because it precludes critical research from clearly defining and then achieving its aims. This weakness may explain why theories that incorporate a normative component, such as Habermas's theory of Communicative Action, have such strong support in the community of critical researchers. Approaches based on Foucauldian ideas (Brooke 2002) or research along the line of classical Marxist critical research (Saravanamuthu 2002) face the discrepancy between normative intention and lack of normative theory.

What can or should be done about this? The obvious but non-trivial answer is that critical research needs to own up to its ethical foundations and then engage in a debate on what ethics means in critical research. This implies that the field of philosophical ethics should be received as part of the theoretical basis of critical research. Part of this reception of ethics is that the ethical evaluation of the aims of critical research is spelled out. Why is power problematic? What does it mean to be empowered or emancipated? How can critical research help alleviating these ethical issues? These are just some of the questions that need to be asked. If critical researchers follow this line of thought, then this leads to immediate disadvantages. All the problems of philosophical ethics will be imported into critical

research. What are criteria of the good? How can morality be defined? Which consequences are relevant for ethical evaluations? What is the role of intentions in ethics? These are difficult questions that ethics has always been struggling with. It is not to be expected that critical researchers will find simple solutions. However, a lack of engagement with these issues will cloud the issues and stand in the way of achieving the goals of critical research. Critical research can only be successful if it defines what it means to be successful. This, in turn, is only possible if it faces its ethical foundations. The result of such a reflection will probably not be a unified and objectified approach to CR, comparable to the way that some positivist researcher imagine a clearly defined core of IS research. Rather, it will be an active debate on (ethical) success criteria. This debate will be ongoing but without it, questions of the value, success, outcome etc. of CR will at best remain one-sided.

Another conclusion to be drawn is that critical IS researchers should take a look at neighbouring academic disciplines that deal with similar issues. Questions of power, of access, of emancipation, of the sense and nonsense of using ICT are discussed in computer ethics, information ethics, and similar hyphen-ethics. Given that the normative theories are explicitly reflected here, critical IS research could benefit by acknowledging this work. At the same time, critical IS research might further these disciplines through its specialist knowledge on economic and organisational use of ICT.

This critique of the ethics of critical research should hopefully be a first intervention in a discourse (to put it in Habermasian terms) which aims to clarify the collective normative self-portrait of critical research. While a consensus on the ethical underpinnings of critical IS research is not to be expected any time soon, it nevertheless stands to reason that the attempt to clarify these issues would further the aims of critical researchers theoretically as well as practically.

7 References

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