

## ARTICLES

### CRITICAL ADULT EDUCATION: A RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CRISIS

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#### Abstract

Many adult educators currently are looking to critical theories of society as a foundation for reconceptualizing the relationship between theory and practice in the four sites of adult education: program administration, instruction, policy development and educational research. In this article, relationships between dialectics, critical theory, and critical social science are described, with particular emphasis on the role of unquestioned vital cultural tradition in perpetuating existing patterns of social reproduction. Implications are drawn for their use in the reconceptualization of the social role of adult education, with the intent to provide a conceptual framework for adult educators who are interested in but relatively uninformed about the concept of critical adult education.

#### Résumé

Présentement, les formateurs et les formatrices d'adultes considèrent les théories de la critique sociale comme le fondement d'une reconceptualisation du rapport entre la théorie et la pratique à travers quatre champs en éducation des adultes: l'administration de programmes, l'enseignement, le développement de politiques et la recherche en éducation.

Dans cet article, les liens entre la dialectique, la théorie critique et la science sociale critique sont décrits; l'accent est mis sur le rôle que la tradition, dans ce qu'elle renferme de vital et d'incontesté, peut jouer dans la perpétuation de modèles de reproduction sociale. Des implications sont dégagées en tenant compte de l'utilisation qui pourrait en être faite en vue d'une reconceptualisation du rôle social

de l'éducation des adultes. L'article fournit un cadre conceptuel aux formateurs et aux formatrices qui bien qu'intéressés à la question sont relativement peu informés du concept d'éducation critique de l'adulte.

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During the latter half of this century adult educators have witnessed the alarming indications of a society in crisis, while at the same time feeling some sense of responsibility to respond in a manner that would enable adults to engage actively in the transformation of their society in a constructive direction. Adult educators who are committed to the ethos of adult education as a social movement have sought appropriate theoretical foundations for their practice, which for reasons of the prevailing preoccupation with learning efficiency, have been selected primarily from the family of behaviouristic and cognitive psychological theories. Although the relationship between these theories and the practices of program administration, instruction, educational research, and policy development has led to greater levels of quantitative learning achievement, it has not provided any guidance in terms of assessing the worthwhileness of these endeavours. The view of the relationship between theory and practice that underpins these theories tends to preclude a critique of society in which the role of social structures is seen to perpetuate the status quo, thereby contributing to the current social crisis.

Contemporary society embodies social pathologies such as anomie, alienation, and personality disorders which are manifest in a variety of human and natural phenomena. Humans abuse themselves, their children and others both physically and psychologically; they degrade their culture; and they violate the natural environment—all in the mindless struggle to achieve success as measured in terms of power and money. On a daily basis the media inform us about the increasing incidence of wife battering, child molestation, rape, murder and suicide, denigration of minority groups, family disintegration, substance abuses, wanton cruelty to animals, destruction of the landscape, despoiling of oceans, toxification of lakes and rivers, pollution of the air, and destruction of the upper atmosphere. To our discredit, an apparent immunity to the significance of these conditions has evolved, allowing them to become commonplace and seen as probably beyond the influence of mere educators. We note with *some* complacency the emergence of institutions within society that are attempting to intervene in some areas such as associations to provide homes for battered wives and children, gay liberation associations, animal protection societies, substance abuse centres, cross-cultural education programs, and environmental protection associations; their existence is insufficient, however, to influence on the large scale the broadly based social cause of the problems which lies in the culturally

rooted, superordinate human drive for success and the concomitant subordination of human concern for rightness, beauty and comprehensibility.

Societies are maintained and transformed through a variety of social institutions such as government, work, religion, sports, family life and education. Societies create settings for learning, and governments and other social agencies administer them for the specific reason of their importance in sustaining and developing the forms of life of a society. The role of adult education in this context is to facilitate learning, both for individuals and for society at large: individual learning is aimed at the acquisition of knowledge, skills and dispositions which are applicable in a variety of established institutional roles, while learning in the broader social framework occurs when individuals develop their unique, creative capacities for transforming social roles in preferable directions. Adult education as it is practised in Western industrialized countries supports individual learning to enhance the maintenance of society, at the expense of the actualization of human potential to foster the advancement of society.

This disparity in educational aims and outcomes has become a matter of concern for many adult educators. As an explanation of contemporary society, critical theory shows how the preeminence of instrumental reason has impoverished social interactions and created inequities in material and social wellbeing. Moreover, the universal acceptance of these social conditions and their antecedents is supported by all of society's institutions, including education. The concern of adult educators is directed towards change in the practice of adult education as a basis for penetrating unquestioned vital cultural tradition and creating the milieu for members of society to engage actively in the transformation of society along just, humane and equitable lines.

Critical theories are explanations of why contemporary Western industrialized societies are the way they are, beginning with a description of the intransigence of members of a society respecting the structures and beliefs comprising the fabric of the status quo—*unquestioned vital cultural tradition*—to impede the transformation of society to one characterized by more justice, humanity and equitability. Anchored in the explanation provided by one or another of the critical theories, and the process of dialectics, critical adult education in the sites of program administration, instruction, policy development and educational research could enhance the potential for society to explore and transform their societies inasmuch as it provides a rich and powerful view of the relationship between theory and practice. *Critical social science* is the generic or meta-methodology for the conduct of critical education

research. Each of these concepts will be examined and a view of adult education informed by these concepts then presented.

### **Unquestioned Vital Cultural Tradition**

The foundation for all forms of social action is a taken-for-granted, unexplored, unproblematic set of structures and beliefs that have evolved over the history of the culture, depicted as the unquestioned vital cultural tradition of a society. Its positive attribute lies in the function of this aggregation of widely understood and accepted background knowledge, assumptions and language patterns in allowing members of a society to enact their social roles and accomplish the day-to-day tasks required for personal and cultural survival. Its negative attribute is visible in the extent to which members of a society hold to its unreflexive, and therefore unquestioned nature, and thus perceive nothing problematic about it or its effects in sustaining an unexamined trajectory in the evolution of the society or its culture.

An assessment of contemporary Western industrialized societies would reveal that enormous progress has been achieved in the creation of material goods and services through the instrumental application of technological knowledge. A predominant feature of the unquestioned vital cultural tradition of these societies is the overriding potency of the human drive toward the achievement of power and money; success in the attainment of these ends is seen as a wholly acceptable basis for attributing value to individuals and groups. This aspect of unquestioned vital cultural tradition has advanced these societies to remarkable heights in their intellectual reproduction, that is, the development and efficient application of scientific knowledge.

The assessment would also reveal that this achievement has been accompanied by a disparate allocation of those goods and services, associated with undesirable forms of social relationships and the relationship between humankind and nature. It can be seen that the enormous progress in the intellectual reproduction of society has occurred at the expense of other, equally essential human drives and values, namely, concerns for the rightness of actions, the beauty of the results of actions, and the comprehensibility of the language of communications.

Unquestioned vital cultural tradition is represented by the concept "lifeworld" which in the schools of hermeneutics and historical relativism is defined as the foundation or context within which individuals engage in communication and which supports the achievement of understanding and agreement. Habermas (1987)<sup>1</sup> quotes Luhmann to depict the nature of the lifeworld:

Normally we do not have to think about the foundations of our corporate life or the condition of its existence, not to justify actions or expressly to find and display appropriate motives. Problematizing and thematizing are not excluded; they are always possible; but normally this non-actualized possibility already suffices as a basis for interaction. If no one calls it into question, then "everything's o.k." (p. 417).

The very nature of unquestioned vital cultural tradition resists explication, reflection and critical interpretation. Individuals are not able to stand apart from their lifeworlds; even with the fullest of intention and effort, they cannot consciously appropriate them in their entirety in order to reflect upon them. At best, individuals can seek out and recover only small portions of their lifeworlds at a time, so that examination and adjudication of unquestioned vital cultural tradition can occur incrementally over time.

At the heart of a theory and practice of critical adult education is the reconceptualization of unquestioned vital cultural tradition as a thing to be reflected upon and problematized, acknowledging its value in enabling the maintenance of cultural survival, while recognizing its imperfections and weaknesses and the effects of unthinking adherence to it as an impediment to active participation of individuals and groups in the transformation of social and cultural patterns in a more desirable direction.

## **Critical Theory**

The majority of contemporary social theories can be grouped according to two fundamental categories: those theories that assume that society is the expression of an underlying natural order and are disposed to manipulate the variables that account for it (structural functionalism, for example that of Parsons)<sup>2</sup>, and those theories that assume that societies because they are created and conceptualized necessarily are disposed to encourage diversity (social phenomenology, for example that of Schutz<sup>3</sup>, and sociology of knowledge, for example that of Berger and Luckman<sup>4</sup>).

Critical theories take neither of these positions: they envision a social order that is constantly emerging and are disposed toward influencing its emergence in a direction that is more just, humane and equitable, (for example, the work of Marx<sup>5</sup>, Giddens<sup>6</sup>, Habermas<sup>7</sup>, Heller<sup>8</sup>, Unger<sup>9</sup>). This disposition is viewed as fundamental to human life and inquiry. Critical theories are theories about modern societies, explaining the deficits that exist in the manner in which society is evolving. Contemporary critical theories dispute the capacities of

modern capitalist and socialist societies to sustain material growth in a democratic manner that is fair, just, and equitable for all members of the society as well as beneficial for nature itself<sup>10</sup>. The relationship between theory and practice, or the way of thinking and acting that is inherent in materialist dialectics, is applied in arriving at this explanation within the context of an unquestioned vital cultural tradition: a worldview with sociohistoric features that include material and social inequities and distorted states of human consciousness.

### **An Explanation of Critical Social Theory**

All critical social theories have in common a normative concern with the fate of humankind in technocratic society. What they attempt to explain are power relationships between the individual and nature and the individual and society, and how meaning and speech, and theory and practice, are reconciled in the evolution of societies. The mediation of these tension-filled relationships is thought to hold the potential for an ever evolving social reality moving toward more just, equitable, and humane social arrangements. There are differences among various critical theories of society. The particular critical theory that most effectively informs critical education explains the deficits in the reproduction of society in terms of the imbalance amongst ways of knowing that result in distortions of communication between those who dominate and those who are dominated. This theory is the theory of communicative action as developed by Jürgen Habermas<sup>11</sup>.

Habermas' theory identifies two forms of human action: action-oriented-to-success (instrumental action); and action-oriented-to-understanding (communicative action). These forms of action are rooted in four distinct but not separate, historically constituted modes of human knowing: **purposive-rational; moral-interpretive; aesthetic-expressive; and explicative**. Purposive rationality has two dimensions, namely, instrumental rationality in which theoretical knowledge is applied without question in teleological action (the non-communicative use of descriptive knowledge), and explanatory rationality in which descriptive knowledge is created.

Moral interpretative rationality is a critique along the lines of established cultural values; aesthetic expressive rationality is a non-cognitive, extraverbal offering and critique of alternatives to established values; and explicative rationality is the analysis of language in search of fuller meaning in speech. Explanatory, moral, aesthetic and explicative rationality are the elements of communicative action. The heart of Habermas' critical theory is the overdetermination of instrumental rationality at the expense of

communicative rationality as the basis for the deficits in the reproduction of societies in advanced industrial countries.

One distinction among variants of critical theory lies in the focus of some on the **false consciousness** of certain groups or classes of society that are dominated by other groups or classes, and those critical theories in which attention is paid to the imbalance existing in human thought (fragmented consciousness) which is reflected in distortions of communication<sup>12</sup>. This is not to suggest that the normative intent of these two variants of critical theory differs, or that the element of instrumental or technocratic rationality is absent from either. What is represented in Habermas' theory is a reframing of the problem from one rooted in false consciousness and its extension to conspiracy and struggle, to one embedded in the notion of fragmented consciousness and communicative competencies.

Inherent in the idea of critique is the assumption that knowledge is always in an incomplete state, and that its emergence can be influenced by the active involvement of individuals as social beings in concert with other social beings, organized around cultural patterns. The way in which social beings engage actively in the mediation of tension-filled relationships is referred to as materialist dialectics.

### **Materialist Dialectics**

Early Greek philosophers defined dialectics as a special auxiliary means of capturing and thinking about our reality. Materialistic dialectics is a tradition of thought and action which is at the heart of critical theories for mediating social change aimed at more equitable, just and humane social arrangements<sup>13</sup>. Many dialectical traditions have evolved since the time of Plato, of which materialist dialectics is a relatively modern form, having been shaped by western philosophers during the 20th Century. Materialist dialectics is characterized by a worldview that involves two aspects of reality within which two methods of thinking and two ways of relating thought and action take place. The foundation for this worldview is the assumption that reality is independent of human beings, and yet through their involvement as a part of it, humans can influence the emergence of social reality<sup>14</sup>. This, in combination with the notion that humans are socially and historically embodied beings, leads to a presupposition of the ongoing nature of both the realization of truth and the evolution of human reality, as well as the progression of individual and species development.

The two methods of thinking and acting and the two aspects of social reality are proposed as a basis for questioning ideas and patterns of social interaction that exist at a given time and are generally accepted

for purposes of sustaining the current social order; the dialectical questioning aims to change societal processes and structures by preserving and at the same time superseding the currently acceptable ideas and patterns.

Reality has two aspects: the world of the **pseudoconcrete** and the **world of the concrete**. The pseudoconcrete is represented by the form or the idea of a phenomenon as it can be seen by individuals through the perceptual screens created by the historical moment and the cultural context. This is only a limited portion of any phenomenon, a simplified abstraction of reality. The whole, or the world of the concrete, can be experienced at least in part by looking beyond the limits of form (the idea of the phenomenon) to get to its essence (the concept of the phenomenon), allowing a richer view of the form to emerge. The limitations that are inherent in form (the pseudoconcrete) are functional insofar as they permit the attribution of structure, order and laws to phenomena such that they can be manipulated in the conduct of the day-to-day affairs of individuals and society.

The two kinds of thinking in which humans can engage are **routine thinking** and **dialectical thinking**. Routine thinking enables people to deal efficiently with the practical problems that comprise their day-to-day affairs. This analytical thinking or formal logic is shaped by the existing historical and social context, by filtering and simplifying experience, and by disregarding the contradictions and inconsistencies that hint at the existence of the essence of phenomena.

**Dialectical thinking** is the process by which the contradictions and inconsistencies between what we believe and what we experience in everyday life are explored in an attempt to grasp more of reality: to reach toward essence, thence to a richer, more complex view of forms of life. This process of informal or dialectical logic is based on a view that totality is constantly emerging as the result of actively engaged forces—the simplified idea of the phenomenon and the contradictions and inconsistencies within and surrounding it—whose conflict leads to qualitative social change.

The disadvantage of **routine thinking** is that, although expedient for solving practical problems, fixation on simplified abstractions of reality tends to accord them the status of concrete reality, and *this* misconception of total truth for all time leads to the formation of ideologies which resist change. As Ackerman and Parsons once put it, "We exclude—and what we exclude haunts us at the walls we set up. We include—and what we include limps wounded by amputation. And most importantly we must live with all this, we must live with our wounded and our ghosts"<sup>15</sup>. By switching to dialectical thinking, a richer perspective is opened that allows for an illumination of the

phenomenon or problem not accessible through routine thought. Social situations can be analyzed through dialectical thinking revealing their internal contradictions as apparent opposites which hold a potential for influencing qualitative social change through mediation. The relationship between routine and dialectical thinking can be captured as a journey back and forth between the pseudoconcrete and concrete dimensions of reality.

There are two ways of relating thought and action, or theory and practice: **everyday praxis** and **revolutionary praxis**. Praxis reflects the relationship between thinking and doing. **Everyday praxis** is employed in goal-directed activity and, in the interests of efficiency, involves a spontaneous tendency to shear a situation of all elements that are peripheral for purposes of the immediate task. This division of the whole through routine thinking creates the simplified phenomenal forms that facilitate focusing on particular tasks required for survival. In necessary everyday praxis the wider reality is neglected or overlooked, as is the existence of the functional, habitual, conceptual filters used to accomplish the simplification of reality, the effect of which is a perpetuation of the gap between form and essence.

It is never possible to disregard entirely evidence of the essence or concept of things; there is always a dim awareness of the whole which although latent can be uncovered by dialectical thinking, allowing individuals to recognize their capacity to alter the world toward a more humanitarian mode of existence. The kind of practical activity of people directed toward the actualization of humankind based on dialectical thinking is known as **revolutionary or critical praxis**. By revolutionary is meant the ongoing spiritual reproduction of society directed toward improved social arrangements for the production and equitable distribution of material wellbeing. By critical is meant the search, through dialectical thought, for internal contradictions or actively engaged forces that provide the basis for mediations directed towards the spiritual reproduction of society. This search portrays the questioning of unquestioned vital cultural tradition.

The central notion of materialist dialectics is that truth happens rather than being discovered. Reality is in a constant state of emergence that human beings in a social, cultural and historical context can influence or mediate through reason and activity. Said another way, the intellectual reproduction of society guided by positivistic thinking and everyday praxis must be nourished by dialectical thinking and revolutionary praxis in order to effect the spiritual reproduction of society: the actions of social beings grounded in rightness, authenticity, preferability and comprehensibility will be directed toward the equitable redistribution of materials and services,

the reconstruction of social relations and our relationship with nature, as necessary in order to produce them.

Critical theory incorporates the power of positivist science that drives the intellectual reproduction of society without resorting to positivism or scientism which preclude the spiritual reproduction of society. The preservation of the power of positivistic thought and related empiricist method is captured in the view taken by early positivists that science was a way of knowing and acting in addition to existing ethical and aesthetic modalities. Later positivists elevated the status of science to scientism thereby crowding out or fragmenting other ways of knowing and acting<sup>16</sup>. Critical theorists advocate the recovery of those submerged or fragmented ways of knowing and acting through dialectical reasoning and revolutionary praxis.

Within the materialist dialectical view of totality, social evolution is seen to occur as a result of praxis. Human beings are always unfulfilled in that being is who they are and essence is who they could be if they were to actualize their unfulfilled historically constituted dispositions and capacities. Progress is not guaranteed in history; it depends on the productive and reproductive practices of historically acting subjects<sup>17</sup>. Returning to the critical theory motif of the dialectical interplay amongst the individual, society, and nature mentioned earlier, this interplay is thought to be the basis for the constructive mediation of social change. The idea here is that the social and natural world is independent of the individual but not extrinsic. That is, although the world is emerging independently, there are numerous ways in which individuals can influence or mediate it. This dialectical and relational position makes possible an internalist approach to society, from the perspective of the lifeworld of individuals, in which individuals collectively influence society, as well as an externalist approach, from the perspective of the social system, in which society requires individuals to conform in order for it to fulfil its functions.

### **Critical Social Science**

The longstanding debate regarding the merits and relationships between quantitative and qualitative research can be resolved through the notion of a critical social science in which the power of *empirical* analytic and interpretive social science can be preserved while at the same time superseded through the use of both routine thinking (formal logic) with its associated everyday praxis and dialectical thinking (nonformal logic) with its associated revolutionary praxis. As mentioned earlier, in the materialist dialectical view, totality is seen to be constantly emerging by means of actively engaged forces whose conflict leads to qualitative and relatively rapid social change. Within

this view individuals are seen to play an active role in the intellectual and spiritual reproduction of society such that an analysis occurs in which theorists and practitioners are closely involved in interaction so that theory and practice mutually modify each other, intertwine, and produce a new emergent.

The dialectical relationship between theory and practice can be distinguished from the one in empirical analytic social science where theory is thought to drive or inform practice and in interpretive social science where theory is understood to enlighten practice<sup>18</sup>. The functions of critical social science reflect a going beyond yet a preserving of the contributions within the scope of empirical and phenomenological research which are limited with respect to effecting transformative social change. These functions are the formation and extension of critical theorems, the organization of the processes of enlightenment, and the organization of the processes of action. They can be used to portray the relationship between critical theory and critical social science. Critical theorems are developed through the use of a critical theory to examine an aspect of contemporary society by individuals or a group who are concerned with making existing patterns of social interaction more fair and just. The critique exposes the contradictions between what a society purports to be and what it is and represents outcomes that are desirable. Critical theorems must stand up to criteria of scientific discourse; intersubjective understandings obtained from reflection within the group must stand up to authenticity tests; and finally the selected action must reflect prudent decisions<sup>19</sup>. Drawing from Habermas, Carr and Kemmis<sup>20</sup> define critical social science as:

...a social process that combines collaboration in the process of critique with the political determination to act to overcome contradictions in the rationality and justice of social action and social institutions. A critical social science will be one that goes beyond critique to critical praxis; that is, a form of practice in which the 'enlightenment' of actors comes to bear directly in their transformed social action. This requires an integration of theory and practice as reflective and practical moments in a dialectical process of reflection, enlightenment and social action carried out by groups for the purpose of transforming society (p. 144).

This preliminary sketch of the process of critical social science is illuminated by Fay's<sup>21</sup> notion of a social theory that is critical and practical as well as scientifically explanatory, thereby identifying a process through which desirable outcomes can be achieved. Conditions must be such that there is a crisis in a social system; that

the crisis is at least in part caused by distortions of consciousness of those experiencing it; the distorted consciousness is amenable to a process of enlightenment; and that enlightenment leads to emancipation in which a group empowered by its new-found understanding radically alters its social arrangements and thereby alleviates its suffering. He posits four inter-related elements of critical social science: a theory of consciousness, a theory of crisis, a theory of education, and a theory of transformative action. These provide a basis for understanding critical theories and determining their appropriateness as a guide for the creation of learning opportunities for adults. Let us turn now to the components of critical social science as outlined by Fay<sup>22</sup>.

### **a theory of consciousness**

First, the theory must point to the way a group of people's view of the world is incongruent with their own life experiences, and it must identify specific contradictions. This is often referred to as critical analysis of unquestioned vital cultural tradition. Second, in addition, it must provide an historical explanation of how this view of the world came into being and is perpetuated. And then finally, it must provide an alternative worldview that overcomes the contradictions between their current worldview and their direct life experiences.

### **a theory of crisis**

A theory must be presented based on a social crisis that a particular society is currently experiencing. This theory must be tied to existing social pathologies rooted in the basic structure of the given society and that threaten to destroy it. The theory must portray historically a dialectical combination of distorted consciousness on the part of individuals and existing structural inequities on the part of society.

### **a theory of education**

This theory must outline the educational structures and processes that will facilitate the changing of societal members' worldview in such a way that contemporary social pathologies become obvious and reveal the individual's role in perpetuating their worldview.

### **a theory of transformative action**

This theory must point out the structural aspects of society requiring change if social pathologies are to be ameliorated. In so doing, it must be able to not only identify those members of society who can be anticipated to carry out the transformative action but also provide at least a general idea of how they might go about doing it.

Fay maintains that in order for a theory to be critical, practical, and scientific, it must be a theory of social life or some portion thereof that contains all of the above-mentioned elements and that they must be systematically and consistently arranged.

### **Critical Adult Education**

The task for adult educators is to explore the implications of critical theory for the provision of learning opportunities for adults which are directed toward education's role in restructuring social arrangements along more equitable, just, and humane lines. Critical theory, including the concept of unquestioned vital cultural tradition and the process of dialectics can be employed in the face of social, political and environmental crises to reconnect theory and practice in the various sites of adult education: program administration, instruction, policy development, and educational research.

As an artifact of society, adult education represents a variation or extension of the unquestioned vital cultural tradition of society writ large. Three elements are generic to all four sites within this specialized domain: practices, social relationships, and the language used to describe them both. These are expressions of the unquestioned vital cultural tradition of the domain. In exploring the relationship between theory and practice in each of the four adult education sites, two levels of theory are evident: the formally established or overarching theory, and the specific institutional variant developed from one or more formal theories and expressed as an institutional plan, system or method. Practices in adult educational sites tend to relate more directly to institutional theories than to formal theories.

### **Program Administration of Adult Education**

The functions of program administration include determination and development of intended learning outcomes, management of instructional and support personnel, attraction of appropriate learners, provision of resources, and program evaluation. For each of these functions there are conventional algorithms to guide their enactment that are drawn from theories of administration developed by researchers; in this paradigm, theory is seen to drive practice, and the value of both is weighed on the grounds of efficiency in achieving quantifiable outcomes that conform to the instrumental orientation of the unquestioned vital cultural tradition. In their application of the theory when decisions are to be made, administrators resort to manipulating the variables the theory explains in a manner that complies with the laws of the theory. Evidence of this preoccupation with instrumental success can be found in the language used widely by educational administrators which is replete with the jargon of

production and accounting: "needs assessment", "program delivery systems", "cost/benefit analysis of programs", "return on training investment", "marketing committees", to name but a few.

A variety of alternatives to current practice become available when the functions of educational administration are cast within the generic elements of practices, social relationships and language, and informed by critical theory; these elements can be interpreted and enacted toward improvement by practitioners engaging in collective and collaborative efforts to penetrate and challenge the unquestioned vital cultural tradition. For example, when decisions are to be made, administrators might consult initially with those upon whom the decisions will impact in order to identify the contradictions existing within the situation, and to examine the contradictions in the context of an evaluation of current practices and organizational relationships, and the common meanings inherent in the way these are described. The examination could expose portions of unquestioned vital cultural tradition, the critique of which would ensure that the dialectical mediation of the contradictions by the group would generate an administrative decision incorporating attributes of rightness, beauty and comprehensibility as well as instrumental efficiency. Inherent in the decision would be the expectation that in its implementation, further contradictions will emerge which in turn would require collaborative mediation toward the evolution of more just, humane and equitable patterns of administrative action that would have the effect of empowering both the educators and the learners within the educational institution. The relationship between theory (the organizational plans) and practice (the administrative decisions) would be seen to mutually modify one another through a collaborative process which is informed by critical theory, and from which a new emergent would be generated.

## **Instruction**

The functions around instruction include the design of instruction, implementation of instruction, and assessment of program outcomes. These functions tend to be guided by established systems and approaches (the institutional theories) that are informed by one or more of the psychological theories. Many of these institutional theories are applied with the dominant intention of increasing in quantifiable terms the efficiency with which pre-established knowledge and skills are acquired. Where instrumental rationality and action are pre-eminent, many functions around instruction have become desensitized and sterilized of values components. This positivistic orientation is reflected in the code words that are heard in the language of practitioners involved in instruction: "stand-alone instructional modules", "learners at risk", "grade point averages",

“reinforcement schedules in contingency management”, “learning disabilities”. Here the relationship between theory and practice is one in which theory drives practice.

In some settings, certain instructional practices are guided by an interpretive human science orientation informed by humanistic psychology; instructors and learners are both active participants in an effort to achieve intersubjective understandings that will enrich the learning experience in the interests of meeting society’s needs and individual needs. Here one encounters the familiar language of andragogy in terms such as “setting the learning climate”, “learning facilitator”, “negotiation of learning objectives”, “self-directed learning”, “sharing learning experiences”, “ego involvement”, “threat reduction”. In this orientation, theory is viewed as revealing practice.

Practices from both these orientations could be improved if practitioners involved in instruction were, for example, to collaborate in a critical analysis of their existing practices, social relationships and language in the context of the unquestioned vital cultural tradition of their institution and their profession. They could evaluate the potential for reconstructing dialectically their endeavours to reflect critical social theoretical foundations as well as psychological foundations. This reconstruction could result in changes in the content of their programs to include moral and aesthetic dimensions representing the knowledge and capabilities to critique unquestioned vital cultural tradition; and changes in their instructional processes such that learners are engaged in group activities that involve interaction with social issues and structures. The relationship between theory (institutionally determined patterns) and practice (implemented instructional processes) would be seen as a reciprocally interactive one, enacted by groups of practitioners who are informed by critical theory, producing enriched versions of theory and steadily improving practices.

## **Policy Development**

Governments generate legislation which is translated into policies that structure the nature and scope of education. These policies allocate educational resources, mandate institutional accreditation, and regulate educational practices. In social democratic political systems, the overarching theory that informs the creation of legislation is capitalism. Within that social theoretical context, the legislation that any government creates is shaped by two major antecedents, namely, the particular ideology of the political party holding power and the political imperative to achieve and maintain power. The development of educational policies informed by current legislation represents practice. The pre-eminence of the steering medium of power accounts

for the kind of educational legislation that is created; its force will have instrumental value for the major actors in the economic sector of the society, will sustain the pattern of existing institutions and their relationships, and will perpetuate the doctrine of individualism as the basis for maintaining a coherent society. Policies are developed in relation to this legislation in the context of unquestioned vital cultural tradition, a significant component of which is the assumption about the role of knowledge in society; that is, that knowledge (the content for education) that is selected to assure continuity of the social order will be disseminated in a manner that assures its optimal accessibility to those who can be expected to contribute to the maintenance of the socio-economic status quo.

Governmental officials develop public policy in education by a process which includes data collection and interpretation respecting the resources available for distribution, the perceived educational needs of the various constituencies, and potential for streamlining educational services, considered in the light of anticipated public response to policy changes. Alternative policy formulations are adjudicated in terms of the potential benefits (cost efficiencies, labour market solutions) and predicted public opinion. Here the relationship between institutional theory (legislation and its antecedents) and practice (policy development) is one in which the theory drives practice.

Alternatives to this pattern of practice are revealed when the functions of policy development are informed by critical theory and reconceptualized as practices, social relationships and language, with the potential for reinterpretation and improvement through collective critique of previously unquestioned vital cultural tradition. When data respecting educational needs and priorities is to be collected and interpreted, policy developers could consult with representatives from all socio-economic sectors of the adult constituency, particularly those who are presently non-participants in the educational offerings for adults. Through these consultations which could focus on current educational policies, the social relationships that influence their development, and the intersubjective understandings that could be achieved, policy developers and constituents could uncover the contradictions that exist in the provision of educational opportunities, and their roots in aspects of unquestioned vital cultural tradition that perpetuate them.

Further collaborative exploration of material and social inequities could lead to dialectical mediation of the contradictions, which could be used by policy developers in generating policies for the education of adult policies, that hold the potential for fostering change in the existing patterns of selecting and disseminating information leading

to new patterns directed toward more just, humane, and equitable educational arrangements. If the policy developers presented and rationalized the proposed policies to their legislator for adjudication, the legislator's view of the imperatives that shape the legislation might be altered, with the attendant possibility of a change in the shape of future legislation. As the implementation of the policies probably would give rise to new contradictions, the same collaborative process between policy developers and constituents could be used to mediate them dialectically prior to further policy development. The relationship between theory (legislation and its antecedents) and practice (policy development) in this orientation is one in which theory and practice mutually modify one another and produce new and richer versions of each.

### **Educational Research**

The goals of educational research are seen conventionally to be either explanation, prediction and control (according to the quantitative view), or understanding and meaning (according to the qualitative view). In the former case, disinterested researchers seek out the inescapable laws that govern behaviour in educational situations. These results are then employed to influence practical change through technical control. Theoreticians, through a division of labour in which they objectively study educational practice, develop theory which in turn is viewed as driving practice.

In the latter case, empathic researchers seek through quasi-participation with practitioners to interpret the manner in which practitioners construct and maintain intersubjective meaning that guides their actions. Here theoreticians are not fully separated by a division of labour; rather they are quasi-participants who through their interpretations convey to practitioners a view of their intersubjective reality that includes aspects of which they may not have been aware. The search is not for objectively derived, inescapable laws, but rather additional meaning subject to the practitioners' verification. In this approach, theory is viewed as revealing practice.

An alternative to conventional approaches, critical social science, becomes available when the previously noted goals of research are reconstructed as the formation and extension of critical theorems, organization for enlightenment, and organization for action. With this orientation, participant researchers join with a group of practitioners who are interested in improving their practices, in improving the social relationships which contextualize those practices, and in improving their understanding of the language they employ to institutionalize their practices and associated social relationships, all of which is, in general, a reflection of unquestioned vital cultural

tradition. These practitioners could be acting in any of the four sites of adult education. Their engagement in research activities can be differentiated from their everyday practice in these sites, in that a specific aspect of practice is singled out for improvement. Both the theoretician and the practitioners collectively and collaboratively analyze their actions in the context of a specific critical theory that addresses the power relationships that prevail as a result of the overdetermination of purposive-rational thought and action. As the formation of critical theorems enlightens all of the participants, they then can enact action plans based on the theorems. It is expected that these plans when put to practice will inevitably turn up additional contradictions which are the basis for extension of the original critical theorems to be researched in ensuing research iterations. Here theoreticians collaborate with practitioners through the employment of a critical theory to improve practice in a more humane, just and equitable direction. The search here is not only for improved understanding, meaning and action as is the case of both the qualitative or interpretive approaches, but in addition an understanding of unintended outcomes and the socio-historical forces that account for them. The view of the relationship between theory and practice in this approach is one in which they are seen to mutually modify each other, intertwine and produce a new emergent with each iteration of the process. This critical social science activity occurs only within the research site.

### **Concluding Comments**

Recent advances in social theory offer the occasion for adult educators to reconceptualize their views of the social role of adult education, as well as methodologies for its implementation. In the enactment of practice within the sites of program administration, instruction, and policy development, practitioners informed by critical theory can actualize their unique potential for interpreting each situation in terms of the opportunities within it to collaborate with their associates (or their learners) in changing their customary practices, altering the established social relationships, and enriching the language in common use to describe the social reality they share. In the myriad of situations that comprise the real world of practice, the nature and scope of opportunities for this collaborative improvement will vary dramatically; however, each successful initiative can provide a stepping stone for further initiatives.

Within the educational research site, practitioners can engage in the formally organized conduct of critical social science through an action-oriented project initiated and facilitated by a theoretician. Here, a specific area of the practitioners' educational practice that has been thematized becomes the focus of the research group's systematic,

collaborative, self-reflective enquiry and planned action, aimed at achieving significant improvements in practitioners' practice, their organizational relationships, and their ways of describing both; that is, through the process of taking action to change these, and learning from the effects of the changes, significant improvements in practice is possible.

The prospects for a critical adult education in all of its sites are especially timely in the light of the crisis in contemporary society. As a major player among society's institutions, an educational system informed by critical theory can enact a leading role toward the attainment of significant advances in the direction of a more just, equitable and humane society.

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17. This notion of progress as an "unconcluded dialectic" is treated in Held's analysis of Horkheimer's formulation of critical theory. Held, *op.cit.*, 175-180.
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