

# Research as Praxis

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*The author, who is concerned with the methodological implications of critical theory, explores issues in the developing area of emancipatory research. She defines the concept of "research as praxis," examines it in the context of social science research, and discusses examples of empirical research designed to advance emancipatory knowledge. The primary objective of this essay is to help researchers involve the researched in a democratized process of inquiry characterized by negotiation, reciprocity, empowerment—research as praxis.*

The attempt to produce value-neutral social science is increasingly being abandoned as at best unrealizable, and at worst self-deceptive, and is being replaced by social sciences based on explicit ideologies. (Hesse, 1980, p. 247)

Since interest-free knowledge is logically impossible, we should feel free to substitute explicit interests for implicit ones. (Reinharz, 1985, p. 17)

Scientists firmly believe that as long as they are not *conscious* of any bias or political agenda, they are neutral and objective, when in fact they are only unconscious. (Namenwirth, 1986, p. 29)

Fifty years ago the Italian neo-Marxist, Gramsci, urged intellectuals to adhere to a "praxis of the present" by aiding "developing progressive groups" to become increasingly conscious of their own actions and situations in the world (quoted in Salamini, 1981, p. 73). This essay explores what it means to do empirical research in an unjust world. In it I discuss the implications of searching for an emancipatory approach to research in the human sciences.<sup>1</sup> It is written from the perspective of one who believes that, just as there is no neutral education (Freire, 1973), there is no neutral research (Hall, 1975; Reason & Rowan, 1981; Westkott, 1979). Bearing in mind the words of Gramsci, my objective is to delineate the parameters

<sup>1</sup> Polkinghorne (1983) traces the history of the term "human science." He argues that "behavioral science" retains the specter of behaviorism and its prohibition against including consciousness as a part of scientific study. "Social science" carries connotations of seeking a knowledge characteristic of the natural sciences in its law-seeking mode of inquiry. "Human science," he argues, is more inclusive, using multiple systems of inquiry, "a science which approaches questions about the human realm with an openness to its special characteristics and a willingness to let the questions inform which methods are appropriate" (Appendix, p. 289).

of a “praxis of the present” within the context of empirical research in the human sciences.<sup>2</sup>

I base my argument for a research approach openly committed to a more just social order on two assumptions. First, we are in a postpositivist period in the human sciences, a period marked by much methodological and epistemological ferment. There has been, however, little exploration of the methodological implications of the search for an emancipatory social science. Such a social science would allow us not only to understand the maldistribution of power and resources underlying our society but also to change that maldistribution to help create a more equal world. Second, research that is explicitly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society — that is, research as praxis<sup>3</sup> — adds an important voice to that ferment.

My exploration of postpositivist, praxis-oriented research draws on three research programs — feminist research,<sup>4</sup> neo-Marxist critical ethnography (Mase-  
mann, 1982; Ogbu, 1981), and Freirian “empowering” or participatory research (Hall, 1975, 1981). Each of these research programs opposes prevailing scientific norms as inherently supportive of the status quo; each is premised on a “transformative agenda” with respect to both social structure and methodological norms; each is, in other words, concerned with research as praxis (Rose, 1979, p. 279). All three of these postpositivist research programs are examples of what Hesse (1980), borrowing from Althusser,<sup>5</sup> terms the “epistemological break” of developing a critical social science with an openly emancipatory intent (p. 196). After brief overviews of praxis-oriented, new paradigm research and of recent efforts in radical educational theorizing aimed at creating an empirically informed Marxism, the essay focuses on the development of empowering approaches to generating knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> In another article (Lather, 1984), I explore what Gramsci’s concept of “developing progressive groups” means in a contemporary context by arguing that women presently constitute a “developing progressive group” ripe with potential for assuming a position at the center of a broad-based struggle for a more equal world.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan (1983) distinguishes between positivist, phenomenological, and critical/praxis-oriented research paradigms. While my earlier work used the term “openly ideological,” I find “praxis-oriented” better describes the emergent paradigm I have been tracking over the last few years (Lather, in press). “Openly ideological” invites comparisons with fundamentalist and conservative movements, whereas “praxis-oriented” clarifies the critical and empowering roots of a research paradigm openly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society.

Praxis-oriented means “activities that combat dominance and move toward self-organization and that push toward thoroughgoing change in the practices of . . . the social formation” (Benson, 1983, p. 338). Praxis is, of course, a word with a history. In this essay, I use the term to mean the dialectical tension, the interactive, reciprocal shaping of theory and practice which I see at the center of an emancipatory social science. The essence of my argument, then, is that we who do empirical research in the name of emancipatory politics must discover ways to connect our research methodology to our theoretical concerns and commitments. At its simplest, this is a call for critical inquirers to practice in their empirical endeavors what they preach in their theoretical formulations.

<sup>4</sup> Feminist research is not monolithic: some researchers operate out of a conventional positivist paradigm, others out of an interpretive/phenomenological one, while others still — an increasing number — use a critical, praxis-oriented paradigm concerned both with producing emancipatory knowledge and with empowering the researched. (see Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Bowles & Duelli-Klein, 1983; Roberts, 1981; Westcott, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> It was actually French philosopher Bachelard who originated the concept of epistemological break, which Althusser then applied to the work of Marx (see Lecourt, 1975). Epistemological break means a rupture in the established way of conceptualizing an issue, a rupture which essentially *inverts*

### The Postpositivist Era

Research paradigms inherently reflect our beliefs about the world we live in and want to live in (Bernstein, 1976; Fay, 1975; Habermas, 1971; Hesse, 1980). Currently we are in a period of dramatic shift in our understanding of scientific inquiry. Lecourt (1975) has termed this present era "the decline of the absolutes" (p. 49; see also Bernstein, 1983; Smith & Heshusius, 1986). No longer does following the correct method guarantee true results, rather, "method does not give truth; it corrects guesses" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 249). It is increasingly recognized that the fact/value dichotomy simply drives values underground. Facts are never theory-independent (Hesse, 1980, p. 172); they are as much social constructions as are theories and values. Whereas positivism insists that only one truth exists, Rich (1979) argues: "There is no 'the truth,' [nor] 'a truth'—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity" (p. 187). Postpositivism has cleared methodology of prescribed rules and boundaries. The result is a constructive turmoil that allows a search for different possibilities of making sense of human life, for other ways of knowing which do justice to the complexity, tenuity, and indeterminacy of most of human experience (Mishler, 1979).

Broadly speaking, postpositivism is characterized by the methodological and epistemological refutation of positivism (Bernstein, 1976, 1983; Mitroff & Kilmann, 1978); much talk of paradigm shifts (Eisner, 1983; Phillips, 1983; Smith, 1983); and by the increased visibility of research designs that are interactive, contextualized, and humanly compelling because they invite joint participation in the exploration of research issues (Reason & Rowan, 1981; Reinhartz, 1979, 1983; Sabia & Wallulis, 1983). Postpositivism is marked by approaches to inquiry which recognize that knowledge is "socially constituted, historically embedded, and valuationally based. Theory serves an agentic function, and research illustrates (vivifies) rather than provides a truth test" (Hendrick, 1983, p. 506). What this means is that "scholarship that makes its biases part of its argument" has arisen as a new contender for legitimacy.<sup>6</sup>

Research programs that disclose their value-base typically have been discounted, however, as overly subjective and, hence, "nonscientific." Such views do not recognize the fact that scientific neutrality is always problematic; they arise from a hyperobjectivity premised on the belief that scientific knowledge is free from social construction (Fox-Keller, 1985; Harding, 1986). Rather than the illusory "value-free" knowledge of the positivists, praxis-oriented inquirers seek emancipatory knowledge. Emancipatory knowledge increases awareness of the contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social processes. Admittedly, this approach faces the danger of a rampant subjectivity where one finds only what one is predisposed to look for, an outcome that parallels the "pointless precision" of hyperobjectivity (Kaplan, 1964). Thus a central task for praxis-oriented researchers becomes the con-

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meaning. Hesse (1980), for example, uses the term to characterize those who argue not only *against* the possibility of an "objective" social science but *for* the possibilities inherent in an explicitly value-based social science with emancipatory goals.

<sup>6</sup> Phrase used by Anyon in a session of the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, April 1984.

frontation of issues of empirical accountability—the need to offer grounds for accepting a researcher’s description and analysis—and the search for workable ways of establishing the trustworthiness of data in new paradigm inquiry.

### Research as Praxis

The foundation of postpositivism is the cumulative, trenchant, and increasingly definitive critique of the inadequacies of positivist assumptions<sup>7</sup> in light of the complexities of human experience (Bernstein, 1976; Cronbach, 1975; Feinberg, 1983; Giroux, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Kaplan, 1964; Mishler, 1979). Postpositivism argues that the present orthodoxy in the human sciences is obsolete and that new visions for generating social knowledge are required (Hesse, 1980; Reason & Rowan, 1981; Rose, 1979; Schwartz & Ogilvy, 1979). Those committed to the development of a change-enhancing, interactive, contextualized approach to knowledge-building have amassed a body of empirical work that is provocative in its implications for both theory and, increasingly, method.

Several examples of this work are available. Consider Bullough and Gitlin’s (1985) case study of one middle school teacher, a study designed to encourage rethinking the meaning of resistance and its place in theories of cultural and economic reproduction within the context of teachers’ work lives. Their research design included the teacher’s written response to a preliminary interpretation of the data, which is an example of the most common form of an emancipatory approach to research—the submission of a preliminary description of the data to the scrutiny of the researched. In an earlier study, Willis (1977) focused on the school-to-work transition in the lives of twelve working-class British “lads.” The most oft-cited example of neo-Marxist critical ethnography, Willis’s work both identifies the area of resistance to authority as a corrective to the overly deterministic correspondence theories then popular in neo-Marxist circles (see Apple, 1980–81; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and builds into his research design an attempt to take the research findings back to the lads for further dialogue. McRobbie (1978) conducted a similar study inquiring into the effects of socialization into femininity on the lives of working-class British females. Finally, a more praxis-oriented example is Mies’s (1984) action-research project in Germany, designed to respond to violence against women in the family. A high visibility street action attracted people who were then interviewed regarding their experience with and views on wife-beating. The resulting publicity led to the creation of a Women’s House to aid victims of domestic abuse. A desire for transformative action and egalitarian participation guided consciousness-raising in considering the sociological and historical roots of male violence in the home through the development of life histories of the women who had been battered. The purpose was to empower the oppressed to come to understand

<sup>7</sup> The basic assumptions of positivism are four: (1) the aims, concepts, and methods of the natural sciences are applicable to the social sciences; (2) the correspondence theory of truth which holds that reality is knowable through correct measurement methods; (3) the goal of social research is to discover universal laws of human behavior which transcend culture and history; and (4) the fact-value dichotomy, the denial of both the theory-laden dimensions of observation and the value-laden dimensions of theory. For an overview and critique of each of the three paradigms, the positivist, the interpretive, and the critical/praxis-oriented, see, respectively, Bredo and Feinberg (1982), Carr and Kemmis (1983), and Bernstein (1976).

and change their own oppressive realities (see also Anyon, 1980, 1981, 1983; Berlak & Berlak, 1981; Everhart, 1983; Hall, 1981; McNeil, 1984; Miller, 1986; Roberts, 1981; Tripp, 1984).

Such examples are part of a rich ferment in contemporary discourse about empirical research in the human sciences, a discourse that spans epistemological, theoretical, and, to a lesser degree, methodological areas. Within radical educational circles, for example, there have been several calls for eliminating the dichotomy between empirical work and the construction of emancipatory theory (Anyon, 1982; Ramsay, 1983; Wexler, 1982). There are, however, few clear strategies for linking critical theory and empirical research.

This failure to probe the methodological implications of critical theory has led to a number of difficulties for praxis-oriented research. The abundance of theoretically guided empirical work affiliated with the "new sociology of education" attests both to the conceptual vitality offered by postpositivist research programs and to the danger of conceptual overdeterminism. This nondialectical use of theory leads to a circle where theory is reinforced by experience conditioned by theory. Marxism's history of sectarianism and "theoretical imperialism" (Thompson, 1978; see also Bottomore, 1978) gives evidence of the need for open, flexible theory-building grounded in a body of empirical work that is ceaselessly confronted with, and respectful of, the experiences of people in their daily lives. Far too often, however, one is left with the impression that neo-Marxist empirical work is conducted to provide empirical specificities for a priori theory (Hargreaves, 1982; Lather, *in press*). Such work demonstrates the continued relevance of Thompson's (1978, p. 13) assertion that too much of Marxist social theory is an "immaculate conception which requires no gross empirical impregnation"<sup>8</sup> (see also Comstock, 1982, p. 371; Kellner, 1975, p. 149; Krueger, 1981, p. 59; Wright, 1978, p. 10).

Additionally, neo-Marxist empirical studies are too often characterized by an attitude toward the people researched that is captured in the words of one research team: "We would not expect the teachers interviewed to either agree with or necessarily understand the inferences which were made from their responses" (Bullough, Goldstein, & Holt, 1982, p. 133). Given the all-male research team and the largely female teacher subjects, one could make much of the gender politics involved in such a statement. But the issue here is the implications of such a stance for the purposes of emancipatory knowledge-building and the empowerment of the researched. One of the central tasks of my argument is to encourage those of us who do critical inquiry to demonstrate how our attitude differs from what Reinharz (1979) has termed the "rape model of research" (p. 95) so characteristic of mainstream social science: career advancement of researchers built on their use of alienating and exploitative inquiry methods.

The difficulties which continue to characterize critical inquiry raise two central questions about the effort to develop a style of empirical research that advances

<sup>8</sup> Two examples of the dangers of conceptual overdeterminism leading to theoretical imposition (the lack of a reciprocal relationship between data and theory) in the new sociology of education are correspondence theory, which posited an overly deterministic mirror-image relationship between schools and the needs of corporate capitalism (Apple, 1979; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), and the wishful thinking which saw resistance in every inattentive student and recalcitrant teacher (for critiques, see Bullough & Gitlin, 1985; Giroux, 1983).

emancipatory knowledge. First, what is the relationship between data and theory in emancipatory research? In grounded theory-building the relationship between data and theory, according to Glasser and Strauss (1967), is that theory follows from data rather than preceding it. Moreover, the result is a minimizing of researcher-imposed definitions of the situation, which is an essential element in generating grounded theory. Given the centrality of a priori theory in praxis-oriented research, it is evident that emancipatory theory-building is different from grounded theory-building. Understanding those differences requires a probing of the tensions involved in the use of a priori theory among researchers who are committed to open-ended, dialectical theory-building that aspires to focus on and resonate with lived experience and, at the same time, are convinced that lived experience in an unequal society too often lacks an awareness of the need to struggle against privilege. Second, growing out of the first question, how does one avoid reducing explanation to the intentions of social actors, by taking into account the deep structures—both psychological and social, conscious and unconscious—that shape human experience and perceptions, without committing the sin of theoretical imposition? This question is tied to both the issue of false consciousness (defined later in this essay) and the crucial role of the researcher vis-à-vis the researched in emancipatory inquiry. An exploration of both of these central questions comprises the remainder of this essay.

For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated by their struggles. Theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, nondogmatic, informing, and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life; and, moreover, it must be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed. This position has profound substantive and methodological implications for postpositivist, change-enhancing inquiry in the human sciences.

### Empowering Approaches to the Generation of Knowledge

For persons, as autonomous beings, have a moral right to participate in decisions that claim to generate knowledge about them. Such a right . . . protects them . . . from being managed and manipulated . . . the moral principle of respect for persons is most fully honored when power is shared not only in the application . . . but also in the generation of knowledge . . . doing research on persons involves an important educational commitment: to provide conditions under which subjects can enhance their capacity for self-determination in acquiring knowledge about the human condition. (Heron, 1981, pp. 34-35)

Krueger (1981) notes that “there are hardly any attempts at the development of an alternative methodology in the sense of an ‘emancipatory’ social research to be explored and tested in substantive studies” (p. 59). Along these lines, Giddens (1979) suggests that the task of a critical social science is to explore the nature of the intersection between choice and constraint and to center on questions of power. Is this not equally true of the research situation itself? Insofar as we have

come to see that evolving an empowering pedagogy is an essential step in social transformation, does not the same hold true for our research approaches?

I am arguing for an approach that goes well beyond the action-research concept proposed over thirty years ago by Lewin, which has given rise to “a very active and lively field” in Britain and Australia over the past decade (Tripp, 1984, p. 20). While Tripp (1984) and Grundy (1982) note the existence of some critical and emancipatory teacher-based action research, the vast majority of this work operates from an ahistorical, apolitical value system which lends itself to subversion by those “who are tempted to use merely the technical form as a means of engineering professional teacher development” (Tripp, 1984, p. 20).

An emancipatory social research calls for empowering approaches to research whereby both researcher and researched become, in the words of feminist singer-poet Chris Williamson, “the changer and the changed.” For researchers with emancipatory aspirations, doing empirical research offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that the research process enables people to change by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their particular situations. In an attempt to reveal the implications that the quest for empowerment holds for research design, I will focus on three interwoven issues: the need for reciprocity, the stance of dialectical theory-building versus theoretical imposition, and the question of validity in praxis-oriented research.

### The Need for Reciprocity

No intimacy without reciprocity. (Oakley, 1981, p. 49)

Reciprocity implies give-and-take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power. It operates at two primary points in emancipatory empirical research: the junctures between researcher and researched and between data and theory. The latter will be dealt with in the next section of this essay; I here address reciprocity between researcher and researched.

Reciprocity in research design is a matter of both intent and degree. Regarding intent, reciprocity has long been recognized as a valuable condition of research fieldwork, for it has been found to create conditions which generate rich data (Wax, 1952). Everhart (1977), for example, presents reciprocity as “an excellent data gathering technique” (p. 10) because the researcher moves from the status of stranger to friend and thus is able to gather personal knowledge from subjects more easily. He traces his evolution from detachment to involvement in a study of student life in a junior high school where he comes to recognize “the place of reciprocity in productive fieldwork” (p. 8). I argue that we must go beyond the concern for more and better data to a concern for research as praxis. What I suggest is that we consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situations. I turn now to those who build varying degrees of reciprocity into their research designs for the purpose of empowering the researched.

Laslett and Rapoport (1975), who studied school dropouts in Britain, build a minimal degree of reciprocity into their research designs. They term their approach “collaborative interviewing and interactive research.” A central component

of their strategy is to repeat interviews at least three times. The repetition is “essential to deal with the feelings roused, often covertly, in order to ‘unlock’ deeper levels of data content” (p. 973). Furthermore, they urge “giving back” to respondents a picture of how the data are viewed, both to return something to the participants and to check descriptive and interpretive/analytic validity.

A Marxist survey researcher, Carr-Hill (1984), expands the use of reciprocity to identify, through initial interviews, a group of twelve to fifteen people with whom the researcher engaged in a series of open discussions about the mismatch between formal education and the way people live their lives. This resulted in a collectively generated survey given to one hundred people, a survey couched in the language of respondents and “in terms of the social categories through which they perceive the world” (p. 281). Additionally, interested participants attended evaluation seminars where survey results stimulated respondents “to critically analyze their own educational history and its relation to their present life-styles” (p. 281).

A maximal approach to reciprocity in research design can be found in the work of two evaluators involved in a four-year project to assess the curricular reform movements of the 1960s (Kushner & Norris, 1980–81). The goal of their research was to move people from articulating what they know to theorizing about what they know, a process the researchers term “collaborative theorizing” (p. 27). This methodology is characterized by negotiation: negotiation of description, interpretation, and the principles used to organize the first-draft report. While they admit that final drafts are usually the preserve of the researcher, Kushner and Norris suggest that the attractiveness of this approach is that all participants, within time constraints, are allowed a role in negotiation of the final meanings of the research. Such collaboration, they contend, offers “an opportunity to extend the range of theories and meanings . . . to give participants the dignity of contributing to theorizing about their worlds . . . [and] through sharing meaning-production . . . [to] develop significant understandings of schooling and education” (p. 35).

A final example is provided by Tripp (1983). He explores what it means for interviews to be coauthored and negotiated in a conscious effort to democratize the research situation. In his case studies of alienation and the school-to-work transition, Tripp held one-to-one and group discussions “as a means of developing participants’ views” (p. 32). The resulting coauthored statements constituted an agreed-upon account of the views of the participants. Tripp cautions, however, that “the negotiation process must be clearly bounded” (p. 38) because participants often wish to “unsay” their words. In Tripp’s view, “the right to negotiate [on the part of research participants] was replaced by the right to comment” (p. 39). Researchers are not so much owners of data as they are “majority shareholders” who must justify decisions and give participants a public forum for critique.

Tripp’s research design, however, is not fully interactive. Reciprocity in the negotiation of meaning is limited to the early stages of investigation. No attempt is made to involve research participants in either the interpretation of the descriptive data or the construction of empirically grounded theory. The lack of involvement of research participants in these later stages of the research process makes possible a situation where the entire issue of false consciousness is skirted. False consciousness is the denial of how our commonsense ways of looking at the world are per-

meated with meanings that sustain our disempowerment (Bowers, 1984; Gramsci, 1971; Salamini, 1981); it is a central issue in any maximal approach to reciprocity.

In order to address this issue, Fay (1977) argues that we must develop criteria/theories to distinguish between people's reasoned rejections of interpretations and theoretical arguments and false consciousness. Fay pinpoints this as a glaring omission, a black hole,<sup>9</sup> if you will, in critical theory: a lack of knowledge about "the conditions that must be met if people are going to be in a position to actually consider it [critical theory] as a possible account of their lives" (p. 218). Fay is pointing out that the creation of emancipatory theory is a dialogic enterprise. Both the substance of emancipatory theory and the process by which that theory comes to "click" with people's sense of the contradictions in their lives are the products of dialectical rather than top-down impositional practices.

Dialectical practices require an interactive approach to research that invites reciprocal reflexivity and critique, both of which guard against the central dangers to praxis-oriented empirical work: imposition and reification on the part of the researcher. As Comstock (1982) argues, "dialogic education is integral to every research program which treats subjects as active agents instead of objectifying them and reifying their social conditions" (p. 386). Yet, notably more often than in either feminist or Freirian praxis-oriented research, the neo-Marxist researcher's self-perceived role is as "interpreter of the world" (Reynolds, 1980-81, p. 87), exposé of false consciousness. This nondialectical, nonreciprocal perception of the role of the researcher confounds neo-Marxist researchers' intent to demystify the world for the dispossessed. Respondents become objects—targets of research—rather than active subjects empowered to understand and change their situations. As a result, neo-Marxist praxis-oriented work too often falls prey to what Fay (1977) notes as the irony of domination and repression inherent in most of our efforts to free one another (p. 209). In the name of emancipation, researchers impose meanings on situations rather than constructing meaning through negotiation with research participants.

There are at present few research designs which encourage negotiation of meaning beyond the descriptive level. The involvement of research participants in data interpretation as well as (to take one further step toward maximal reciprocity) theory-building remains largely an "attractive aspiration" (Kushner & Norris, 1980-81, p. 35). But as Fay notes, feminist consciousness-raising groups provide a model for how to begin to flesh-out the nature of maximal reciprocity: the involvement of research participants in the construction and validation of knowledge.

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, thousands of small grassroots groups formed to provide a way for women to exchange thoughts, experiences, and feelings. From this movement emerged the feminist maxim: the personal is political. What were once thought to be individual problems were redefined as social problems that require political solutions. For Fay (1977), the lesson from these groups is that

coming to a radical new self-conception is hardly ever a process that occurs simply by reading some theoretical work; rather, it requires an environment of trust,

<sup>9</sup> Sears (1983) first used this term in a conference paper.

openness, and support in which one's own perceptions and feelings can be made properly conscious to oneself, in which one can think through one's experiences in terms of a radically new vocabulary which expresses a fundamentally different conceptualization of the world, in which one can see the particular and concrete ways that one unwittingly collaborates in producing one's own misery, and in which one can gain the emotional strength to accept and act on one's new insights.

The experience of the Women's Movement confirms that radical social changes through rational enlightenment require some mechanism for ensuring that those conditions necessary for such enlightenment will be established and maintained. (p. 232)

Following Fay (1977), I propose that the goal of emancipatory research is to encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the persons being researched at least as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge. To do this, research designs must have more than minimal reciprocity. The following is a summary of some of the procedures and theory necessary to attain full reciprocity in research:

- Interviews conducted in an interactive, dialogic manner, that require self-disclosure on the part of the researcher. An example of self-disclosure can be found in Oakley's (1981) research with women and their experience of motherhood. Arguing the need for interactive self-disclosure, Oakley emphasizes a collaborative, dialogic seeking for greater mutual understanding. This is opposed to mainstream interview norms where interview respondent's questions about the interviewer's own life are deflected (see also Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Hanmer & Saunders, 1984).
- Sequential interviews of both individuals and small groups to facilitate collaboration and a deeper probing of research issues.
- Negotiation of meaning. At a minimum, this entails recycling description, emerging analysis, and conclusions to at least a subsample of respondents. A more maximal approach to reciprocity would involve research participants in a collaborative effort to build empirically rooted theory.
- Discussions of false consciousness which go beyond simply dismissing resistance to Marxist interpretations as such. We need to discover the necessary conditions that free people to engage in ideology critique, given the psychological hold of illusion – “the things people cling to because they provide direction and meaning in their lives” (Fay, 1977, p. 214). There is a dialectic between people's self-understandings and researcher efforts to create a context which enables a questioning of both taken-for-granted beliefs and the authority that culture has over us (Bowers, 1984). There, in the nexus of that dialectic, lies the opportunity to create reciprocal, dialogic research designs which not only lead to self-reflection but also provide a forum in which to test the usefulness, the resonance of conceptual and theoretical formulations.

### Dialectical Theory-Building versus Theoretical Imposition

I do not believe that imposing Marxist rather than bourgeois categories is socialist practice. (Carr-Hill, 1984, p. 290)

The goal of theoretically guided empirical work is to create theory that possesses “evocative power” (Morgan, 1983, p. 298). By resonating with people's lived con-

cerns, fears, and aspirations, emancipatory theory serves an energizing, catalytic role. It does this by increasing specificity at the contextual level in order to see how larger issues are embedded in the particulars of everyday life. The result is that theory becomes an expression and elaboration of politically progressive popular feelings rather than an abstract framework imposed by intellectuals on the complexity of lived experience.

Building empirically grounded theory requires a reciprocal relationship between data and theory. Data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container into which the data must be poured. The search is for theory which grows out of context-embedded data, not in a way that automatically rejects a priori theory, but in a way that keeps preconceptions from distorting the logic of evidence. For example, Ramsay (1983) aptly criticizes Anyon's critical ethnographies (which focus on the effects of class and gender on the structure of U.S. public school classrooms) for telling us more about her predispositions than about the phenomena studied. Anyon's (1980, 1981) *certainty* and *clear-cutness* are particularly problematic, for, as Ramsey notes, "while we would agree that there is no such thing as 'value-free' or objective research, we would argue that there is a need to keep as open a frame of reference as is possible to allow the data to generate the propositions" (p. 316).

Theory is too often used to protect us from the awesome complexity of the world. Yet, "the road to complexity" is what we are on in our empirical efforts (Clark, 1985, p. 65). Moving beyond predisposition requires a set of procedures that illuminates the ways that investigators' values enter into research (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982, p. 439; Feinberg, 1983, pp. 159-160). Anchoring theoretical formulations in data requires a critical stance that will reveal the inadequacies of our pet theory and be open to counter-interpretations. Apple (1980-81), in cautioning that conceptual validity precedes empirical accuracy, neglects the largely undialectical role that theory plays in most critical ethnography. Empirical evidence must be viewed as a mediator in a constant mutual interrogation between self and theory. Otherwise, neo-Marxist theory will fail to transcend "the hubris of the social sciences" still present in the two emergent alternatives to positivist orthodoxy—the interpretive and critical paradigms (Moon, 1983, p. 28). As Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1983) note, "An emancipatory intent is no guarantee of an emancipatory outcome" (p. 431). The struggle, of course, is to develop a "passionate scholarship" (Du Bois, 1983) which can lead us toward a self-reflexive research paradigm that no longer reduces issues of bias to canonized methodology for establishing scientific knowledge (Cronbach, 1980; Goddard, 1973, p. 18).

The search for ways to operationalize reflexivity in critical inquiry is a journey into uncharted territory. Sabia and Wallulis (1983) make clear the danger: too often critical self-awareness comes to mean "a negative attitude towards competing approaches instead of its own self-critical perspective" (p. 26). Guidelines for developing critical self-awareness, hence, are rare. Nevertheless, while the methodological implications of critical theory remain relatively unexplored (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982, p. 281), the need for research approaches which advance a more equal world is receiving some attention (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Apple, 1982; Comstock, 1982; Fay, 1975, 1977). Various suggestions for operationalizing reflexivity in critical inquiry can be drawn from that small body of work.

First, critical inquiry is a response to the experiences, desires, and needs of oppressed people (Fay, 1975). Its initial step is to develop an understanding of the world view of research participants. Central to establishing such understandings is a dialogic research design where respondents are actively involved in the construction and validation of meaning. The purpose of this phase of inquiry is to provide accounts that are a basis for further analysis and “a corrective to the investigator’s preconceptions regarding the subjects’ life-world and experiences” (Comstock, 1982, p. 381).

Second, critical inquiry inspires and guides the dispossessed in the process of cultural transformation; this is a process Mao characterized as “teach[ing] the masses clearly what we have learned from them confusedly” (quoted in Freire, 1973, p. 82). At the core of the transformation is “a reciprocal relationship in which every teacher is always a student and every pupil a teacher” (Gramsci quoted in Femia, 1975, p. 41). Thus, critical inquiry is a fundamentally dialogic and mutually educative enterprise. The present is cast against a historical backdrop while at the same time the “naturalness” of social arrangements is challenged so that social actors can see both the constraints and the potential for change in their situations.

Third, critical inquiry focuses on fundamental contradictions which help dispossessed people see how poorly their “ideologically frozen understandings” serve their interests (Comstock, 1982, p. 384). This search for contradictions must proceed from progressive elements of participants’ current understandings, or what Willis (1977) refers to as “partial penetrations”: the ability of people to pierce through cultural contradictions in incomplete ways that, nevertheless, provide entry points for the process of ideology critique.

Fourth, the validity of a critical account can be found, in part, in the participants’ responses. Fay (1977) writes: “One test of the truth of critical theory is the considered reaction by those for whom it is supposed to be emancipatory. . . . Not only must a particular theory be offered as the reason why people should change their self-understandings, *but this must be done in an environment in which these people can reject this reason*” (pp. 218–219, italics in original). The point is to provide an environment that invites participants’ critical reaction to researcher accounts of their worlds. As such, dialogic research designs allow praxis-oriented inquirers both to begin to grasp the necessary conditions for people to engage in ideology critique and transformative social action, and to distinguish between what Bernstein (1983) calls “enabling” versus “blinding” biases on the part of the researcher (p. 128).

Fifth, critical inquiry stimulates “a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action” (Comstock, 1982, p. 387). The researcher joins the participants in a theoretically guided program of action extended over a period of time.

Earlier in this essay, I argued for reciprocity as a means to empower the researched. Here reciprocity is employed to build more useful theory. Research designs can be more or less participatory, but dialogic encounter is required to some extent if we are to invoke the reflexivity needed to protect research from the researcher’s own enthusiasms. Debriefing sessions with participants provide an opportunity to look for exceptions to emerging generalizations. Submitting concepts and explanations to the scrutiny of all those involved sets up the possibility of theo-

retical exchange — the collaborative theorizing at the heart of research which both advances emancipatory theory and empowers the researched.

A strictly interpretive, phenomenological paradigm is inadequate insofar as it is based on an assumption of fully rational action.<sup>10</sup> Sole reliance on the participants' perceptions of their situation is misguided because, as neo-Marxists point out, false consciousness and ideological mystification may be present. A central challenge to the interpretive paradigm is to recognize that reality is more than negotiated accounts — that we are both shaped by and shapers of our world. For those interested in the development of a praxis-oriented research paradigm, a key issue revolves around this central challenge: how to maximize the researcher's mediation between people's self-understandings (in light of the need for ideology critique) and transformative social action *without becoming impositional*.

Comstock (1982) says that the critical researcher's task is to stimulate research participants into "a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action" (p. 387). Doing such work in a nonelitist and nonmanipulative manner means that one wants to be not a "one-way propagandist," but rather like the Cobbett written about by Thompson (1963): Cobbett acknowledged "the aid which he is constantly deriving from those new thoughts which his thoughts produce in their minds." Thompson notes: "How moving is this insight into the dialectical nature of the very process by which his own ideas were formed! For Cobbett, thought was not a system but a relationship" (p. 758).

For theory to explain the structural contradictions at the heart of discontent, it must speak to the felt needs of a particular group in ordinary language (Fay, 1975, p. 98). If it is to spur toward action, theory must be grounded in the self-understandings of the dispossessed even as it seeks to enable them to reevaluate themselves and their situations. This is the central paradox of critical theory and provides its greatest challenge. The potential for creating reciprocal, dialogic research designs is rooted in the intersection between people's self-understandings and the researcher's efforts to provide a change-enhancing context. Such designs would both lead to self-reflection and provide the forum called for by Fay (1977) whereby the people for whom the theory is supposed to be emancipatory can participate in its construction and validation.

In sum, the development of emancipatory social theory requires an empirical stance which is open-ended, dialogically reciprocal, grounded in respect for human capacity, and yet profoundly skeptical of appearances and "common sense." Such an empirical stance is, furthermore, rooted in a commitment to the long-term, broad-based ideological struggle to transform structural inequalities.

### Issues of Validity

The job of validation is not to support an interpretation, but to find out what might be wrong with it. . . . To call for value-free standards of valid-

<sup>10</sup> The inadequacies of an overreliance on rationality in human behavior are eloquently captured in Ascher's letter to de Beauvoir, a letter written to "clear the air" after Ascher had written a biography of de Beauvoir: "I don't think you ever grasped sufficiently the way the unconscious can hold one back from grasping a freedom consciously chosen. Too often I see your sense of freedom being based on

ity is a contradiction in terms, a nostalgic longing for a world that never was. (Cronbach, 1980, pp. 103-105)

What does empirical rigor mean in a postpositivist context?<sup>11</sup> If validity criteria are the products of the paradigms which spawn them (Morgan, 1983), what validity criteria best serve praxis-oriented research programs? The need to systematize as much as possible the ambiguity of our enterprise does not mean that we must deny the essential indeterminacy of human experience — “the crucial disparity between the being of the world and the knowledge we might have of it” (White, 1973, p. 32). My point is, rather, that if illuminating and resonant theory grounded in trustworthy data is desired, we must formulate self-corrective techniques that check the credibility of data and minimize the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence (Kamarovsky, 1981).

Currently, paradigmatic uncertainty in the human sciences is leading to the reconceptualization of validity. Past efforts to leave subjective, tacit knowledge out of the “context of verification” are seen by many postpositivists as “naive empiricism.” Inquiry is increasingly recognized as a process whereby tacit (subjective) knowledge and propositional (objective) knowledge are interwoven and mutually informing (Heron, 1981, p. 32; Polanyi, 1967). The absence of formulas to guarantee valid social knowledge forces us to “operate simultaneously at epistemological, theoretical and empirical levels with self-awareness” (Sharp & Green, 1975, p. 234). Our best tactic at present is to construct research designs that demand a vigorous self-reflexivity.

For praxis-oriented researchers, going beyond predisposition in our empirical efforts requires new techniques and concepts for obtaining and defining trustworthy data which avoid the pitfalls of orthodox notions of validity. The works of Reason and Rowan (1981) and Guba and Lincoln (1981) offer important suggestions in this regard. Reason and Rowan advise borrowing concepts of validity from traditional research but caution us to revise and expand those concepts in ways appropriate to “an interactive, dialogic logic” (p. 240). Their notion of validity is captured in the phrase “objectively subjective” inquiry (p. xiii). Guba and Lincoln argue for analogues to the major principles of orthodox rigor. They state that in order to fulfill the minimum requirement for assessing validity in new paradigm research the techniques of triangulation, reflexivity, and member checks should be enlisted. Building on these, I offer a reconceptualization of validity appropriate for research that is openly committed to a more just social order.

First, *triangulation* is critical in establishing data-trustworthiness, a triangulation expanded beyond the psychometric definition of multiple measures to include multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes. The researcher must consciously utilize designs that allow counterpatterns as well as convergence if data are to be credible.

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a rationalism that denies that murky inner world over which we have as little, or much, control as the world outside us. And, in fact, control would be your word, not mine. For I believe we have to love this deep inner self and try to be in harmony with it” (Ascher, De Salvio, & Ruddick, 1984, p. 93; see also Harding, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> Issues of validity in openly ideological research are dealt with much more fully in Lather (in press).

Second, *construct validity* must be dealt with in ways that recognize its roots in theory construction (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Our empirical work must operate within a conscious context of theory-building. Where are the weak points of the theoretical tradition we are operating within? Are we extending theory? Revising it? Testing it? Corroborating it? Determining that constructs are actually occurring, rather than they are merely inventions of the researcher's perspective, requires a self-critical attitude toward how one's own preconceptions affect the research. Building emancipatory social theory requires a ceaseless confrontation with and respect for the experiences of people in their daily lives to guard against theoretical imposition. A *systematized reflexivity* which reveals how a priori theory has been changed by the logic of the data becomes essential in establishing construct validity in ways that contribute to the growth of illuminating and change-enhancing social theory.

As an example, Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1983), in a noteworthy effort to reconstruct "the social relations that produce the research itself" (p. 431), write that "our commitment to bringing our subjects into the research as active participants [has] influenced our rethinking of our original categories . . ." (p. 434). As part of their self-reflexive essay on their research into the relation between changes in the structural situation of women and changes in consciousness, they explore the tension "between letting the data speak for itself and using abstracted categories." They ask, "How do we explain the lives of others without violating their reality?" (p. 429). Contrast this with Willis's (1977) classic ethnography where there is no clear indication how the researcher's perspectives were altered by the logic of the data. Without this account, one is left viewing the role of theory in this research (which is so strongly shaped by a priori conceptions) as being non-dialectical, unidirectional, an imposition that disallows counter-patterns and alternative explanations (see also Lather, in press; Walker, 1985).

Third, *face validity* needs to be reconsidered. Kidder (1982) contends that although it has been treated lightly and dismissed, face validity is relatively complex and inextricably tied to construct validity. "Research with face validity provides a 'click of recognition' and a 'yes, of course' instead of 'yes, but' experience" (p. 56). Face validity is operationalized by recycling description, emerging analysis, and conclusions back through at least a subsample of respondents: "Good research at the nonalienating end of the spectrum . . . goes back to the subjects with the tentative results, and refines them in light of the subjects' reactions" (Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 248). The possibility of encountering false consciousness, however, creates a limit on the usefulness of "member checks" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) in establishing the trustworthiness of data. False consciousness, an admittedly problematic phenomenon (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983), however, does exist. For reasons illuminated by Gramsci's (1971) theories of hegemony, most people to some extent identify with and/or accept ideologies which do not serve their best interests. Thus, an analysis which only takes account of actors' perceptions of their situations could result in research being incorrectly declared invalid. The link between face and construct validity and the possible false consciousness of research participants is an area that very much needs empirical exploration. Perhaps the best that can be suggested at this point is that, just as reliability is necessary but not sufficient to establish validity within positivism, building face validity into new para-

digm research should become a necessary but not sufficient approach to establishing data credibility.

Fourth, given the emancipatory intent of praxis-oriented research, I propose the less well-known notion of *catalytic validity* (Brown & Tandom, 1978; Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 240). Catalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it, a process Freire (1973) terms conscientization. Of the guidelines proposed here, this is by far the most unorthodox; it flies directly in the face of the positivist demand for researcher-neutrality. The argument for catalytic validity is premised not only within a recognition of the reality-altering impact of the research process, but also in the desire to consciously channel this impact so that respondents gain self-understanding and, ultimately, self-determination through research participation.

Efforts to produce social knowledge that will advance the struggle for a more equitable world must pursue rigor as well as relevance. By arguing for a more systematic approach to triangulation and reflexivity, a new emphasis for face validity, and inclusion of catalytic validity, I stand opposed to those who claim that empirical accountability either is impossible to achieve or is able to be side-stepped in praxis-oriented, advocacy research. Lack of concern for data credibility within praxis-oriented research programs will only decrease the legitimacy of the knowledge generated therein. Praxis-oriented research can only benefit from agreed-upon procedures which make empirical decision-making public and hence subject to criticism. Most important, if we do not develop such procedures, our theory-building will suffer from a failure to protect our work from our passions and limitations. I join Lecourt (1975) in his call for an "ardent text" (p. 49) grounded in "the real motion of knowledge" (p. 79) which is as tied to passion as to "objectivity." The tension between advocacy and scholarship, however, can be fruitful only to the extent that it pushes us toward becoming vigorously self-aware in our efforts to develop a praxis-oriented research paradigm.

## Summary

This essay has one essential argument: a more collaborative approach to critical inquiry is needed to empower the researched, to build emancipatory theory, and to move toward the establishment of data credibility within praxis-oriented, advocacy research. The present turmoil in the human sciences frees us to construct new designs based on alternative tenets and epistemological commitments. My goal is to move research in many different and, indeed, contradictory directions in the hope that more interesting and useful ways of knowing will emerge. Rather than establishing a new orthodoxy, we need to experiment, document, and share our efforts toward emancipatory research. To quote Polkinghorne (1983): "What is needed most is for practitioners to experiment with the new designs and to submit their attempts and results to examination by other participants in the debate. The new historians of science have made it clear that methodological questions are

decided in the practice of research by those committed to developing the best possible answers to their questions, not by armchair philosophers of research" (p. xi).

Let us get on with the task.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> To avoid becoming "an armchair philosopher of research" myself, I am presently engaged in what I see as a long term effort to explore student resistance to liberatory curriculum in an introductory women's studies course (Lather, 1986). My theoretical concern is with the processes of "ideological consent" (Kellner, 1978, p. 46), especially the enabling conditions which open people up to ideology critique and those which limit these processes (A. Berlak, 1986).

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