A Critical Assessment of 'Distortion of Face to Face: Communicative Reason and Social Work Practice' by Ricardo Blaug

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The Frankfurt school, an institute that began before the Second World War, was composed of academics influenced by the philosophy of G.W.F Hegel and Karl Marx. Director, Max Horkheimer, claimed that critical theory was to take a new theoretical approach, with four main characteristics: it was to be interdisciplinary, reflective, dialectical and most importantly, it was to be critical. It was not to be only diagnostic but also to be remedial, to be theoretical but also practical. Therefore, the goal was not just to elucidate what was wrong with contemporary society, but also to highlight progressive features, to encourage change and transformation (Finlayson, 2005). After the events of the Second World War, first generation critical theorists, Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, became increasingly pessimistic about the potential for change. This is reflected in their work, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, in which they argue rationality is closely intertwined with domination and mastery (Finlayson, 2005).

Habermas sought to move away from this pessimism that he saw as counterproductive to the aims of critical theory (Finlayson, 2005). In his earlier work, Habermas offers an alternative history of the enlightenment and ends on an optimistic note through the ideal of the public sphere (Finlayson, 2005). In his later work 'The Theory of Communicative Action' (1984, 1987) he develops a dualistic notion of society that allowed him to move further from the pessimism of the early Frankfurt School by highlighting that the type of rationality to which they referred is only one type of rationality, instrumental rationality, which has a specific place. Communicative rationality was another option, and had the potential to change society and therefore regains critical theory's ability to become both practical and applicable to social problems (Habermas, 1987).

Blaug's (1995) article, 'Distortion of Face to Face: Communicative Reason and Social Work Practice', uses Habermas's later work to explore the current problems faced by social work practice. He argues that 'communicative methods provide insights, criticisms and practical suggestions for social work, as well as theoretical support for certain practice initiatives' (Blaug 1995:423). In order to assess this application, first I will clarify the Habermasian concepts used in the application. Secondly, I will illustrate how Blaug (1995) has

applied Habermas's theory. Whilst assessing, it is clear that the application reveals the damaging effects of bureaucratisation on social work and contextualises this within a wider pattern in society. Also through his application, Blaug (1995) has highlighted the importance of including those affected (in the decision-making process through discourse) in order for it to be justifiable. Finally, through his thorough use of practical examples, Blaug's (1995) application illustrates the practical ability of critical theory.

However, Blaug's (1995) application is severely limited. First, it fails to use a relevant part of Habermas's theory on the Welfare State and juridification. Second, Blaug (1995) does not acknowledge the need to address economic problems and an unsympathetic government in order to create a space for discourse to exist. Third, the issue of communication when it comes to the relationship between patient and professional highlights further weaknesses.

Habermas theory asks that 'we conceive of society simultaneously as a system and as a lifeworld' (Habermas 1987:120). The lifeworld has been vaguely defined as the unregulated, 'unmarketized' (Finlayson, 2005:51) part of part of society, included aspects such as the family, the household, culture, media, and voluntary organisations (Finlayson, 2005). It is concerned, through communicative action, with the 'processes of social integration and of socialization' (Habermas, 1987:139). In this sphere, communicative reason is the dominant way of coordinating society. It not only applies to the realm of human affairs but also creates and repairs it (Blaug 1995), by minimising risk of dissent (Finlayson 2005). Crucially the aim of communicative reason is to reach 'mutual understanding' (Habermas, 1987:137).

In contrast, the system, constituted by the economy and the state within the mediums of money and power, is based on instrumental reason (Habermas,1987). This is concerned with efficiency, of using the most effective means to get to an end without concern for what the end is or the consequences of the process. It is thus orientated towards domination and control (Blaug,1995). Notably, Habermas does not say that instrumental reason is destructive per se; instead it has a place and enables increasingly complex modern societies to function (Habermas, 1987).

Instrumental reason only becomes destructive when it begins to intrude into the lifeworld, when our communicative practices are constantly undermined by instrumental ways of thinking (Blaug, 1995). The fragile equilibrium is often disrupted by the system's tendency to encroach upon the lifeworld: 'the subsystems of the economy and the state... penetrate ever deeper into the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld' (Habermas, 1987:367). As the system is dependent on the lifeworld, it destructs its own basis.

In order to contain this we need to 'protect areas of life that are functionally dependent on social integration through values, norms, and consensus formation' (Habermas, 1987:373). This is where Habermas asserts the importance of discourse. Communication is based on validity claims to truth, appropriateness and sincerity (Blaug, 1995). However, when one decides to question such claims, for example whether what someone said is actually true, those in communication enter into a discourse in which one will argue in order to support their claim, providing reasons and evidence to convince the other (Blaug, 1995).

Discourses however can often be 'power-saturated' (Blaug 1995:430), a situation in which people begin to act instrumentally and communication becomes distorted. Therefore, Habermas has developed the ideal of

discourse ethics that will help those involved understand the degree to which communication has been distorted and therefore whether the decision, or understanding, reached at the end can be justified. People are socialised into understanding conditions under which these claims can be fairly debated. This communication that is truly free from power is referred to as the Ideal Speech Situation (ISS). For a decision to be a truly moral one, during discourse all those involved should have been allowed to speak, all must have been listened to, and must have been able to challenge another's claim. It must be recognized that discourse can rarely ever meet the form of the ISS but we should still pursue it, as discourse that can get closest to it is more justified (Blaug, 1995). Notably, to avoid problems of universalism and relativism, Habermas does not give a universal answer to the outcome of such discourses but instead he provides a justified process, claiming that this is all one should want from a theory (Blaug, 1994).

Blaug (1995) contextualizes the strains placed on social work. On the one hand it experiences the material problem of increased need whilst there are decreasing resources, a situation that results in enormous occupational stress. Whilst on the other hand, the solutions in the form of social policy initiatives come from the distant government who has not been concerned with upholding the basic aims of social work and instead demands for increased efficiency and modern management, resulting in an increase in bureaucracy. (Blaug, 1995).

It is widely acknowledged in literature that the solutions being offered are predominantly bureaucratic. However, Blaug (1995) argues that the literature is focused more on which function bureaucratisation fulfils instead of questioning *why* it is bureaucracy 'that floods to satisfy their chosen function' (Blaug, 1995:424). It also fails to contextualize it within a wider pattern in society and therefore does not offer effective solutions to resist bureaucratisation. This is what Habermas's critical theory enables us to do (Blaug, 1995).

Critical theory claims bureaucracy is the organisational thought derived from instrumental reason. We reach for bureaucracy because instrumental reason has come to increasingly dominate our way of thinking (Blaug, 1995). The nightmarish consequence of this can be seen in the solutions consistently being imposed onto social work, where 'things are neither stable, measurable nor separable' (Blaug, 1995:425) as we are dealing with human beings. Therefore, these solutions will only ever cause more problems with their dehumanizing tendencies.

Blaug (1995) claims that care is a dual aspect activity; there is a need for both instrumental and communicative rationality. Although it requires both, it is the face-to-face interaction between the caregiver and the receiver that is fundamental, therefore communicative reason must be predominant. Unfortunately, we are seeing an increase in colonization of communicative practices by instrumentalism as part of the wider colonisation of the lifeworld by the system. Blaug (1995) supports this argument with examples such as increasing systemizing of child protection and the Community Care legislation.

In order to resist this colonisation, we need to rid instrumental reason where it is inappropriate and to do this we need to better understand communicative reason and judge when it is truly meaningful (Blaug, 1995). Blaug (1995) asserts that this can be done using the theory of discourse ethics where we use the ISS as a moral test. In this process, we include all those affected by decisions such as what practices should be used (for example Electro-Convulsive Therapy in British psychiatric hospitals). As there will always be inevitable distortions in

discourse, especially within a dual-aspect practice, we are reaching for the ISS whilst we know it can almost never be reached. It remains that those discourses that are closest are preferable. Blaug (1995) illustrates, with various examples, how this process can be used in social care. It is highlighted that the constraints on discourse need to be defensible in a discourse free from domination. As interaction is fundamental to caring, discourses must be maximised and supported where they do not yet exist, and structures should be designed to encourage discourse as much as possible (Blaug, 1995).

The practical value of Habermas's theory in social work practice is further elucidated. First, it increases opportunities for non-instrumental discussion on issues such as supervision, inter-agency discussion, training, assessments and monitoring. Second, it offers ideological support for initiatives taking place by facilitating networking, staff support groups, action learning and empowerment groups, peer supervision, developments in family therapy, how needs are defined in assessments, and advocacy projects which are all based on communicative methods (Blaug, 1995).

In the area of applied social research, Habermas's theory of communicative rationality has enabled a change in methodological research, which helps break down the researcher/ subject divide and influences the choice of subject, encouraging the shift away from the instrumental character of current contemporary social research (Blaug, 1995).

Blaug (1995) concludes that the way forward is;

> 'not more efficiency, nor is it a reduction in organized care. Rather it is necessary to find ways to bring organized care under the control of communicative structures. Communicative rationality suggests many local ways in which such a process might be begun. It counsels us to reject instrumental reasoning about caring for others, and it makes us suspicious of organized care for its tendency to become colonized' (Blaug: 437).

Through its use we can challenge those with unjustified power and discover that unfair, destructive, bureaucratized systems can be changed.

Blaug's application has been insightful. By using Habermas's theory as an interpretative tool for cultural criticism (Blaug:1997), one can see the problems of bureaucratization and how it stifles social work and contradicts its underlying values. Blaug (1995) highlights that the problems faced by social work care are not isolated but can be contextualised in Habermas's diagnosis of modernity and the problem of colonisation of the lifeworld.

Importantly, Blaug's (1995) application using ISS has highlighted the immorality of excluding the service users of social care work from discourse. Therefore it encourages increasing involvement from the user, alongside the opportunity to design and shape the operation of the services, whilst by keeping the emphasis on meaningful participation, he enables us to distinguish it from deceptive consumer choice. Finally, Blaug (1995) has effectively supported his application with various practical examples reinstating the practical ability of critical theory.

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However, Blaug's (1995) application has significant limitations. It can be highlighted that he fails to use a crucial part of the theory: the account of the Welfare State and Juridification (Habermas,1987). Habermas (1989) explores the role of the dual function of law in terms of the dichotomy between the lifeworld and the system. When it comes to the Welfare State, it seems that it is law as a medium that is used, resulting in the intrusion of instrumental reason into the lifeworld (Tweedy and Hunt, 1994) and further colonizing it. He shows how the paradox between the aims and goals of the Welfare State leads to increasing alienation, normalization, surveillance, reification, and subjection (Habermas, 1989). Although Habermas (1989) acknowledges there is a dire threat faced by the Welfare State project, he also insists that there is no other alternative and that in order to resolve this paradox, a practice of 'social curbing' (Bartholomew, 1993:144) needs to occur through communicative action and an increase in the autonomous public sphere to provide indirect control in order for a 'reflexive continuation' (Bartholomew, 1993:144) of the Welfare State.

Here one can be critical of Blaug's (1995) application, as he does not use such a relevant aspect of Habermas's theory. Firstly, he could have used the idea of the crisis faced by the Welfare State to emphasize the relevance of the application. Secondly, he could have used the juridification of the Welfare State to illustrate in more detail the colonization of the lifeworld. Third, the paradox of the Welfare State and the damaging bureaucratisation that creates 'pathologies' contradictive to its aim, could have again been used to support his application in more detail. Importantly, Blaug (1995) does not address Habermas's (1989) solution to Welfare State problem in which Habermas (1989) clearly emphasizes a role for the public sphere which works between the system and the lifeworld, and how it ties into his own use of communicative action within social work practice. Also, more recent literature addressing the impact of the global economy and the ability of a welfare state to function (Sitton, 2003:143) is again not addressed, suggesting that Blaug's (1995) focus of the problems faced by social work practice is too narrow.

Another problem in Blaug's use of communicative reason and discourse is that he does not acknowledge that in order for such a space to exist, the current strains on social care that he mentions, such as a lack of resources and an increasing demand alongside a government that is unsympathetic to its aims and constantly undermines the values of social care, crucially needs to be addressed first. It seems as though he offers a process that many in the profession and patients themselves are already aware is needed, but they are unable to put it into practice as there are other mechanisms in place that prevent it.

This criticism can be further elaborated to criticise Habermas's theory itself. Many have argued that Habermas has an unrealistic idea of an autonomous economic sphere (Sitton, 2003), which derives from his dualistic conception of society: of the system and a lifeworld and the relation between them. Equally, there is a problematically ambiguous definition of what actually constitutes the lifeworld and the system. This 'sharp separation of system and lifeworld processes cannot be sustained in regard to the capitalist economy and so leads to a false conception of the autonomy of capitalist processes' (Sitton, 2003:122). Here we can see how limitations in his theory have led to the accusation that by ignoring real economic constraints, he fails to see the what makes equal communication in the public sphere and the lifeworld (in the case of the Blaug's application, the everyday world of healthcare) impossible.

Blaug's addresses the problem of communication between a carer and a patient whose ability to communicate has been severely affected by illness or hardship, such as someone who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, someone in the middle of a manic episode, or a three year old frightened child. Blaug (1995) states that by using discourse ethics and ISS 'gifted carers make that interaction as equal and as fair as they can... even when ... nothing like an equality of communicative chances is ever really possible' (Blaug, 1995:433). The way Blaug (1995) handles this dilemma can be criticised by asking that when a patient is in such a position, is discourse what they really want or expect from a carer? A patient in this position may want help or guidance rather than being constantly coerced into discourse with an aim of reaching mutual understanding.

If one concludes that discourse and the Ideal Speech Situation is appropriate then there are still limitations to this application. Blaug (1995) describes that although completely equal communication may not be possible between the patient and carer, the carer will assess the deviations from ISS themselves in order to question whether the outcome from the discourse is justifiable. Here one could argue that it has not overcome the inequality of such communication, as the patient still does not have an adequate contribution.

This can be related to another criticism of Habermas's theory of communicative reason and consensus, which some would argue fail to theorise pluralism and power. Influenced by theorists such as Lyotard and Foucalt, it is possible to argue that emphasis on communicative reason results in supporting the status quo in regard to exclusion and existing inequalities. An insistence to always have consensus can be accused of being too idealistic and unrealistic, and instead institutions should not strive for this but should work towards facilitating a vibrant agonistic public sphere (Karppinen, Moe et al, 2008).

In conclusion, Blaug (1995) applies Habermas's critical theory to illustrate the problems that are faced by social work practice and how the theory can provide practical suggestions for change and theoretical support. He uses Habermas's core idea, in which society is constructed of two spheres: the lifeworld (associated with communicative reason) and the system (associated with instrumental reason). The problem of bureaucratisation that stifles the work of social care work is contextualised within the theory of colonisation of the lifeworld by the system. In order to contain this destructive process, communicative reason that promotes face-to-face interaction (which is fundamental to care) must be promoted as much as possible and instrumental reason must be removed from where it is inappropriate. This can be done through the use of discourse, discourse ethics and the ISS. Blaug's (1995) application has been effective at shedding light on the problems bureaucratisation creates for social work practice. It also shows the importance of including users of social and healthcare services in discourse in order to make justifiable decisions. Furthermore, by thoroughly supporting the application with practical examples, Blaug (1995) has been effective in showing the practical ability of Habermas's critical theory. However, Blaug's (1995) application has severe limitations that overshadow its successes. Crucially, it does not draw on a relevant part of Habermas's theory about the welfare state and juridification. It also does not acknowledge economic constraints that prevent the possibility of discourse, issues which can be extended to criticise Habermas theory itself. In addition, Blaug's (1995) application runs into difficulties when challenging the problems of communication between patient and carer. Finally, one can challenge the notion of constantly striving for consensus.

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