

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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Citation reference: Harvey, L., 1990, *Critical Social Research*, London, Unwin Hyman, all rights revert to author. (A modified version, 2011, is available at <http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/csr>, updated 10 June, 2011.)

5 CONCLUSION

5.1 Empirical enquiry

It has been the intention of this book to show how empirically grounded critical social research can be accomplished. However, it is as much about reaffirming a way of thinking as it is about providing approaches to data. Indeed it is not data collection, but the intrinsic critique of the interpretative framework that marks out critical social research from other forms of social scientific and cultural enquiry.

Critical social research is clearly not constrained by its data collection techniques. The empirical studies analysed above include the whole gamut of research tools: observation, both participant and non-participant; formal interviews with random samples; semi-structured, unstructured, and in-depth interviewing; key informant testimonies; analysis of personal and institutional documents; mass media analysis; archive searching; examination of official statistics; and reviews of published literature. Furthermore, critical social research also uses a wide variety of analytic techniques: ethnographic interpretation, historical reconstruction, action research, multivariate analysis, structuralist deconstruction and semiological analysis.

It is not data collection devices nor analytic techniques that sets empirical critical social research apart from either explanatory or interpretive approaches. It is the way in which data are approached and the framework within which data are analysed that is crucial. Critical social research does not set out to find the 'causes' of observed social phenomena. Nor does it satisfy itself with the interpretation of the meanings of social actions. Critical social research is fundamentally critical because it aims to shatter the illusion of observed 'reality'.

This book will have succeeded if, after reading it you are no longer able to watch a movie without being overwhelmed by the obviousness of its ideological coding; cannot sit through a news broadcast without being exasperated by the constant manifestations of oppressive mechanisms; become infuriated when you walk into a toy shop and see banks of girls toys packaged in pink and sporting smiling faces of pretty but inactive girls (unless they are performing housewifely chores). It will have succeeded if you are able to articulate this exasperation and fury in terms of the generation of an empirical critical enquiry. In short the book succeeds if, on the one hand, you see, and are able to analyse, class, race, gender oppression in every walk of life, and, on the other, have the confidence to undertake empirical critical research.

5.2 Getting beneath the surface

The critical studies examined all attempt to get beneath the surface of apparent reality to reveal the nature of oppressive social structures. They are not ethnographic, semiological, or multivariate analyses

per se but are critical studies that make use of different data collection tools and analytic techniques. These studies aim to show what is really going on: how the worker is exploited by the capitalist; how the public is turned into a manipulated mass; how working class kids get working class jobs; how advertisements really work; how the Western movie reproduces capitalist ideology in mythical form; how women make and remake their lives under conditions of capitalist patriarchy; how the women's movement in India failed to take account of the impact of class and caste on women's subordination; how the community college fails black ghetto students; and so on.

In all these studies, the attempt to reveal the nature of oppressive social structures involves a process of dialectical deconstruction and reconstruction in some form or another. This process has been characterised in terms of the interrelationship of a number of building blocks that form the elements of dialectical analysis. These elements are abstraction, essence, totality, praxis, ideology, history and structure. The different studies have been viewed in terms of how they develop and interrelate these elements.

A critical methodological approach, as we have seen, involves a materialist conception of the world. Understanding requires the penetration of outward appearances through the methodological process of abstraction from the general category to the concrete, historically specific which is then related to the whole (totality). Comprehension of even the most apparently simple form requires a grasp of structure (made accessible through abstraction from the general category), and history. These are constantly interrelated through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction within a comprehensive methodological framework which seeks not to demonstrate final absolute truth, but to present an approximate reflection of reality which is subject to continuous change.

We have seen the process of deconstruction and reconstruction in particular studies. Broadly speaking, two focuses that facilitate the dialectical analysis have emerged from these studies; contradiction and myth.

5.3 Contradiction

Contradiction is, of course, the classical Marxist approach. It is encoded in the Engelian notion of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Cockburn, for example, takes this as axiomatic arguing that all phenomena contain their opposites and that the form of the contradiction determines the nature of the synthesis. Westwood sees contradictions as inherent within the particular form of oppressive social structure that operates at any historical moment. In her research it is the inherent contradictions of women's lives under conditions set by patriarchal capitalism.

Focussing on myth involves revealing the nature of taken-for-granted presuppositions. Myths about appropriate work for Asian immigrants (Duffield), myths about American democracy (Mills), myths about male strength and intelligence (Liddle & Joshi) and the myth of the ostensive sales message of advertisements (Williamson) all provided the focus for critical deconstruction.

In both cases ideology plays a central role. It is ideology that serves to conceal contradictions and it is ideology that renders myths natural. Ideology itself is transparent. It has to be made to appear. While ideology is taken for granted and equated, subconsciously, with common (non)sense the contradictions remain as anomalies and the myths as stereotypes. Only as ideology is revealed is the deconstructive-

reconstructive process enabled. That is, the anomaly is linked clearly to the structural forms through which it operates by being shown to legitimate those historically specific forms. Thus the anomaly becomes a contradiction; an analytic concept that binds essence to totality. Similarly, a stereotype is transformed into a myth once the ideology that renders it natural is revealed as legitimating and reproducing oppressive social structures.

The process of dialectical analysis, though, requires more than an abstract and empty thesis on the nature of (dominant) ideology, it needs to materially ground ideology by locating it in particular practices. Vague abstract notions of capitalist ideology, of patriarchy or racism are as unacceptable to critical social research as a means of deconstruction as the taken-for-granted abstractions of non-critical social research. One might, for example, begin with the abstract notion of patriarchy as an organising principle but it must be seen as empty and in need of filling, of being made concrete.

Westwood, for example, looks at the contradictions in the lives of women factory workers. She considers 'anomalies' that are manifested in the women's collusion in their own oppression. She does not simply propose some abstract concept of patriarchy (or capitalism or racism) as somehow responsible for this. Instead, in transforming the anomalies into clearly visible contradictions she looks at specific practices in the light of structural processes. So, for example, the celebration of marriage which is central to the collusive process of patriarchal domination is seen as sensible in the light of access to (male) economic resources. Thus the contradiction between the resistance to capitalist patriarchy (embodied in the celebration of marriage) and the collusion (embodied in marriage itself) not only becomes apparent in itself, when thus empirically grounded, but also provides the focus for deconstructing the nature of working women's lives. Contradictions become the pivot through which Westwood is able to dig beneath the surface of the lives of women factory workers.

Willis does much the same in his analysis of the resistance of 'the lads'. The lads are able to penetrate educational ideology and yet indulge in forms of resistance that effectively enables capitalism to reproduce exploited unskilled labourers. This anomalous situation is transformed into contradiction when working-class culture is examined. Working-class culture provides a critique of capitalism which is only partial. Working-class culture is not wholly oppositional but, in its reification of labouring, its sexism and its racism, it absorbs and re-produces dominant ideology.

It is important to remember that using contradiction as the focus of deconstruction is not simply about spotting an anomaly and building an elaborate theory around it to explain it away. Contradictions emerge through dialectical analysis. An anomaly remains an anomaly until it is transformed. It becomes a contradiction as the result of a dialectical process which relates the historically specific anomaly (e.g. accepting the housewife role while finding the tasks tedious) to the social structure (job market, nursery provision). This requires the revelation and clarification of the ideological processes at work (capitalist patriarchy) through specific articulated presuppositions (the nurturing role of women, women working for 'pin-money') that legitimate the contradiction. So contradiction is not just there waiting to be discovered but itself emerges as the result of dialectical analysis, a shuttling back and forth between anomaly, structure and ideology. Contradictions are not to be explained away nor are they the end in themselves but provide the focus for the whole deconstructive-reconstructive process that reveals the real nature, and ways of working, of oppressive social structures.

That this is the case is perhaps best attested to by looking at Cockburn's study. Hers appears to be a hard-line assertion of the centrality of contradiction. She argues that everything contains its own contradiction, that the nature of the contradiction determines the synthesis, and that contradictions are the goal of her research. It thus seems that she denies that revealing contradictions is a dialectical process. Further it implies that she sees contradictions as in themselves the sufficient outcome of the research rather than as the focus for deconstruction. But, of course, she is not denying this at all. Just because all phenomena contain their own contradiction does not mean that discovering them is straightforward. She is not simply suggesting that the contradiction is empirically or theoretically apparent. While phenomena contain their own contradiction, discovering it is not like flipping over a coin and seeing the obverse, the contradiction is concealed behind an ideological screen. It is a dialectical task to reveal the contradiction, as her study of print compositors shows. Similarly, while contradictions are the 'goal' of her empirical work they are clearly not the end in themselves but provide the basis for a full dialectical deconstruction of the making and remaking of the lives of the skilled craftsman.

5.4 Myth

Laying bear myths also requires an analysis of ideology and the examination of its practical manifestations. Myths should not be confused with ideology. Myths are plausible 'consensual connotations' (Heck, 1980). Their plausibility and legitimacy is dependent upon the ideological support system. Identifying myths requires not merely asserting their presence but establishing it. This too is a dialectical process. The consensual connotation or stereotype is transformed into the analytic category of myth once the specific is related to the totality in terms of its ideological legitimation. The stereotype (of the compliant Asian worker) becomes myth once ideological presuppositions (racism) are revealed in terms of concrete practices (work touts, insecure work). The myth then becomes the focus for the deconstruction of what is really going on (the exploitative processes of hegemonic racist capitalism).

The establishment of myth is developed in enormous detail in Wright's study. Reflecting the work of structuralist anthropologists like Levi-Strauss he uncovered basic myths that the myriad forms of the Western cinematic film could be reduced to. Unlike structural anthropologists he saw myths as communications about appropriate behaviour. Revealing four versions of the Western myth was not the end in itself, nor indeed could the classification have emerged inductively from the analysis of fifty-four films. On the contrary, the identification of four varieties was only possible because, in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the Western plots, they were related to the social totality in which they occurred. The classical Western structure, for example, provided insights into the nature of market economy, and dialectically, only worked as a myth and was therefore identifiable as such, in that totalistic context.

So contradiction and myth have both provided focuses for the deconstructive-reconstructive process of dialectical analysis. They give the critical analyst a handle to grasp in the complex process of shuttling back and forth between abstraction, essence, totality, ideology, history, structure and praxis. However, it must be emphasised that contradiction and myth should not be conceived of as something lying around waiting to be picked up. They must be seen as fundamentally dialectical constructs in themselves. Contradictions and myths must be established, in terms of empirical practices, not conjured out of the researcher's presuppositions.

5.5 Knowledge as process

Critical social research is about a constant shuttling back and forth between concepts and data, structure and part, past and present, theory and practice, involving a continual process of reconceptualisation. The work is never done. At any point in time a dialectically developed understanding can be framed and communicated. But the formulation and communication is not the knowledge; its not another grain in the bucket, but itself part of the continual *process* of knowledge development. Critical social research, in directing its attention to oppressive social structures sees the development of knowledge as intrinsically concerned with *engaging* prevailing social structures, ideological forms and taken-for-granted interpretations. It is this engagement and its impact on ways of looking and developing knowledge which is crucial, rather than the articulation of a set of techniques that can be mimicked.

What the exploration of the case studies shows is that it is undesirable, and even impossible, to disentangle method from theory and epistemology. Methodology is the interface of all three and to attempt an explanation of the methodic practice of critical social research independent of substantive theoretical concerns and underlying presuppositions is to ignore the interdependent nature of critical social enquiry. There is no such thing as critical social *method*. But there is equally clearly a way of working towards critical social research. This is a dialectic and totalistic approach which operates at the level of *methodology*.

However, as the case studies none the less illustrate, critical social research makes considerable use of four approaches: critical case study, radical historicism, critical ethnography, and structuralist techniques. This is not, in any way, meant to delimit what approaches critical social researchers can adopt nor do these four approaches constitute a set of mutually exclusive alternatives.

5.6 Critical case study

In critical (or theoretical) case study the researcher deliberately selects, for detailed empirical analysis, a case which provides a specific focus for analysis of myth or contradiction. Goldthorpe and Lockwood selected a case study which as far as possible provided the conditions to endorse the myth of embourgeoisement. They undertook a detailed analysis of the workers in Luton with a view to exploding the myth. Grimshaw and Jefferson selected their theoretical case study in such a way that it provided the setting in which the contradictions of policing were most clearly exposed. The selection of a large metropolitan county force with a centralizes command structure and a range of specialist departments, located in a multiracial area of economic decline, brought into stark relief the way the legal, democratic and work structures are mediated in practice.

Although not necessarily referring to their work as critical case study, this approach is effectively adopted by other critical researchers. For example, Cockburn's selection of a male white craft union in her analysis of the impact of, and resistance to, the introduction of new computerised technology constituted a critical case study as did Liddle & Joshi's selection of professional women in India. Neither group was seen as in any way representative of a wider social group. On the contrary, they were selected as paradigm cases.

A variety of different data collection techniques can be adopted within a critical case study approach. Goldthorpe and Lockwood relied principally on structured interviews augmented by observation in

ascertaining the interests, attitudes, social networks and lifestyle of their case-study group. Grimshaw and Jefferson used non-participant observation and document analysis. Cockburn preferred depth interviewing and Liddle & Joshi used variety of questioning techniques in their repeated contacts with the case-study group. There is nothing inherently advantageous in any particular data collection method for critical case study. The case study is not the end in itself, rather it is an empirical resource for the exploration of wider questions about the nature of oppressive social structures. What is important is that the study is designed to critically address myths or contradictions at the level of actual practices that relate to broader questions about the operation of oppression.

So, critical case study takes abstract theoretical notions and deconstructs them in terms of social practices and explores how these operate in terms of the social totality. Goldthorpe and Lockwood broke down the embourgeoisement thesis into three dimensions and examined each in terms of the actual aspirations, attitudes and work and leisure activities of the supposedly embourgeoisied workers which they compared to middle-class/white-collar workers. Grimshaw and Jefferson similarly broke down each of the abstract notions of 'work', 'law' and 'democracy' into its components and addressed each in terms of policing practices.

Crucially, the critical social researcher's use of critical case study is directed at exploring wider social structural and historical issues. Goldthorpe and Lockwood, for example, were not simply concerned with the attitudes of workers in Luton, nor were they even concerned with simply endorsing or rejecting the embourgeoisement thesis. They were interested in the thesis in so far as it related to the question of the revolutionary potential of the working class in advanced industrial society and the implications of this for labour politics. Cockburn was as much interested in showing that gender was as crucial as class in the analysis of the labouring process as she was in exploring the issue of the introduction of new technology into the workplace.

5.7 Radical historicism

Radical historicism presupposes that constructing histories is an interpretive process rather than the recording of 'facts'. Although usually reconstructing the past in terms of the present it does attempt, in one way or another, to dig beneath the surface of the historical development of structural forms. This it does usually in one of two ways. First, as Marx did in *Capital*, to address the prevailing structural forms and deconstruct them. This structural analysis then logically guides the reconstruction of history. Rather than the taken-for-granted, apparent, social structure informing a presentist history it is the deconstructed social structure that is used as the basis for historical analysis.

The second approach is to adopt a critical perspective or world view which informs the reconstruction of history. The intention is to address the taken-for-granted current social structure not as self-evident but as having emerged from an ideological legitimization of oppressive structures. It presupposes that, for example, patriarchal or racial oppression exists and thus examines particular social practices in relation to the legitimating ideologies and economic structures that endorse it. Thus, Mumtaz and Shaheed undertook their study of women in Pakistan by initially focussing on the history of the embryonic Women's Liberation Movement and progressively widening their study to situate the details of the history of women's movements in the context of nationalist and religious struggles.

Radical historicism involves the uncovering of historical evidence but the meaning of the evidence depends upon a reconceptualisation of dominant social structures. The reconstruction of history takes place alongside the structural analysis: it both informs and is informed by it. Liddle and Joshi, for example, did not just document the stages in the curtailment of women's freedom in India but related the particular practices, on the one hand, to economic considerations related to the concentration of wealth in upper castes, and on the other, to a concerted effort by males to undermine the female power principle.

5.8 Critical ethnography

Critical ethnography is a widely used technique in critical social research. The involvement and close attention to detail which characterises ethnography make it useful for rendering visible the invisible, and for revealing anomalies and common-sense notions. A critical ethnography transforms the anomalies and taken-for-granted into contradictions and myths by situating them in broader social and historical analyses. Critical ethnography thus focuses on the way in which contradictions are negotiated and myths re-presented.

Critical ethnography differs from conventional or traditional ethnography in its attempt to link the detailed analysis of ethnography to wider social structures and systems of power relationships in order to get beneath the surface of oppressive structural relationships. In essence, critical ethnography attempts, in one way or another, to incorporate detailed ethnographic analysis directly into dialectical critique. For example, critical ethnographic study, in focusing on the way existing practices reproduce ideologies, reveals the way in which the subjects collude in, rather than engage, their own oppression.

Critical ethnography proceeds by raising substantive questions about structural relationships which the ethnographic study elaborates in terms of actual practices. Like the critical case study, the detail of the ethnographic work is a resource in the deconstruction of social structures.¹ Critical ethnography makes use of the same data collection techniques as conventional ethnography (in-depth interviewing, participant observation, etc.) and is also reflexive. However, there is far less concern with 'neutrality' both in terms of the interventionist role of the researcher and the presentation of a non-partisan perspective.

The intention is to go beyond the grasping of the subjects' meanings. Critical ethnography asks how these meanings relate to wider cultural and ideological forms. Critical ethnography involves keeping alert to structural factors whilst probing meanings. It involves seeing, for example, how cultural values impinge upon the study group as Willis did in relating counter-school culture to working-class culture and Westwood did in relating shop-floor celebratory rituals to patriarchal notions of femininity.⁷

Once again, the relationship between wider contexts and actual practices is not self-evident. It emerges as a result of a process of dialectical enquiry. The critical ethnographer works from two directions at once. In examining and sorting the ethnographic material the critical researcher engages the 'explanatory' frames through lateral thinking which call into question taken-for-granted presuppositions by proposing radical alternative analyses. Conventional 'pile building' (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Weis, 1985) of horizontally segmented field material (see Section 1.4) is a useful way of doing this if the segmentation process is guided by structural relations. The identification of pertinent structural relations

requires a parallel analysis of the prevailing social, political and economic structure in which the detailed study is located.

These alternatives, grounded in empirical data, are guided by broader theoretical and conceptual analyses. In turn the emerging understanding of the nature of actual practices impinges on the guiding theoretical reconceptualisation. Totality and empirical detail constantly mediate one another in the emergence of a more perceptive understanding of the nature and operation of oppressive social structures. Assumptions about patriarchy are, for example, mediated by collusive practices. Engagement for marriage, as Westwood found out, is entered into by women knowing that it will adversely affect their social life, yet seeing it as a means to access an increased share of economic resources. In turn the nature of the practices, their legitimation, and the way they relate to broader mechanisms of oppression are more clearly revealed. Engagement prefigures female and male role stereotypes that consign women in marriage to a nurturing role.

Through ideological analysis, critical ethnography aims to reveal both contradictions and myths. Inconsistencies, for example, between what people do and what they say are transformed from anomalies to contradictions. What, for example, black community college students had to say about time-keeping and what they actually did was anomalous. It became an analytic contradiction, for Weis, once it was explained in terms of the notion of 'white man's clock-time' within the culture of the Black urban ghetto. The students were paying lip-service to the white middle class meritocratic system whilst living in an everyday milieu that operated on a different sense of time.

5.9 Structuralist techniques

There are two main structuralist techniques incorporated into critical social research. First, semiological analysis, which attempts to uncover the connoted level of denoted messages. This approach is widely used in relation to the mass media but is applicable to, and derives from, a general approach to the analysis of any sign system (Barthes, 1974; Saussure, 1986).

Semiological analysis sees a sign as any cultural symbol which conveys a meaning. The sign is made up of two elements, signifier and signified. The signifier is sound or image which signifies something. For example, the sound 'dog' is a signifier for a 'four-legged mammal that barks'. What is signified is the concept 'dog'. Hence the sign is the concrete relation between concept (signified) and sound/image (signifier). Signs are arbitrary. They have no intrinsic meaning but take their meaning from the relationship to other signs.² The meaning of signs comes from their difference from other signs. The key of semiological analysis is that signs do not have intrinsic meaning. Meaning is generated through the relationship of signs.

Barthes (1974) argues that signs are not innocent, self-evident, indicators but that they contain two meanings, the denotative (i.e. literal or face-value meaning) and connotative (i.e. underlying or interpreted message, the symbolic meaning).³ Put simply, the denotative level is what is 'represented' by the sign, for example, 'rose' represents a flower that grows on a thorny stem; and the connotative level is the inference that can be drawn from it, for example, the connotation of 'rose' may be 'passion'. The first level sign 'rose' becomes a second level signifier for the signification, 'passion' (second level sign).

NOTE 4

The first stage of semiotic analysis is to examine the denoting sign through a deconstruction into signifiers and signifieds. The second stage involves a critique of these denoted signs in order to reveal the connoted symbolism. Finally, these connotations are examined and the taken-for-granted or myth which underpins these symbolic representations is elaborated.

The uncovering of connotations cannot be done simply at the level of the sign system (text, picture, etc.). Connotations are contextualised meanings, they are not self-evident. The transparency of the connotation only becomes clear as the denotation is dialectically related to the totality. This requires engagement with the context within which the denoted message operates and the structures it draws on.

Judith Williamson's decoding of advertisements clearly indicated how a secondary message operates beneath the surface of the ostensive message. She examined the text/image sign system that constituted the advertisement and showed how these related to wider structures through the appropriation of referent systems. For example, the naturalisation of nature to provide a common-sense framework for the encoding of the desirability of the 'natural'. Thus objects of nature depicted in advertisements (mountains, fields, fruit, etc.) transfer this taken-for-granted desirability and acceptability to the products with which they are juxtaposed.

The task of the semiologist, then, is to uncover the taken-for-granted or myths that are implicit in the connotative level. This involves a constant engagement with apparently innocent denotations. The denotation is seen as a signifier at the connotative level, but this requires a totalistic perspective to reveal the transparent connotation. Connotations are rooted in common sense and can only be revealed if the structures of meaning that sustain common sense are specified and reconceptualised.

The second structuralist technique centres around the identification of binary oppositions and narrative sequences. The approach again draws on linguistics and presupposes that the structure of language is inherently dichotomous (Jackobsen, 1962) and, consequently, that the symbolic meaning of an image is determined only by differences.⁵ When, for example, two characters in a story are opposed in a binary structure, their symbolic meaning is virtually forced to be both general and easily accessible because of the simplicity of the differences between them. This binary structure operates to provide conceptual differences and each society has a system of such oppositions and it is through them that myths are (unconsciously) understood by members (Levi-Strauss, 1963).

A second aspect of this approach is the deconstruction of narrative into a set of functions. Propp (1968), for example, in analysing Russian fairy stories, identified a set of shared functions that recurred in the same order. This structuralist approach is transformed into a critical social research process when the binary oppositions and the narrative functions are related to the prevailing socio-economic and political structure. It is then that their social meaning becomes manifest. Wright's analysis of the Western is a good example. His transformation of the structuralist approach is predicated, as we have seen, upon a view of myth as a communication from a society to its members about how people should act. He shows how Westerns, as contemporary American myth, are structured in terms of binary oppositions that are easily grasped and unambiguous. The narrative represents social types acting out a drama of social order. The narrative tells us what the characters actually do and this provides the meaning for the audience. Wright showed, for example, that the classic Western could be reduced to a set of shared narrative functions. However, the meaning of these functions and the binary oppositions only comes from locating them within a wider social structure. Thus, he demonstrated how the classic Western

reproduced and legitimated the individualism of the market economy. Similarly, the development of the professional plot reflected the emergence of the planned corporate economy.

Wright's analysis was not just a process of showing how specific functions or binary oppositions could be seen to reflect particular aspects of shifts in the nature of capitalism. The deconstructed story was related dialectically to the social totality through the notion of narrative sequence. Narrative sequences explain a change in social relationships in the myth and ensures that the narrative 'makes sense' to the reader who recognise their own situation. It is through the narrative sequence which resolves social dilemmas that Wright was able to link the deconstructed myth to the social totality.

5.10 The critical social research process

By way of concluding remarks I will review and summarise what is involved in doing critical social research. In offering this sketch there is no intention of reiterating basic methodic practices such as how to enter the field as a participant observer, how to avoid leading questions in a structured interview, how to select a suitable case study, how to sample historical archives, or how to undertake multivariate analysis. There are plenty of method texts that provide guidance on such issues. This sketch reasserts the view, that underpins the analysis throughout the book, that methodology is not about data collection methods in themselves but is about the whole process of enquiry.

Doing sociology is not just about selecting and constructing a data collection technique. On the contrary, it embraces conceptualisation of the problem; theoretical debate; specification of research practices; analytic frameworks; and epistemological presuppositions. Data collection is not a self-contained phase in a linear process. Rather, all aspects of the research process are interrelated and all bear on each other. There is no neat linear sequence of events as the idealised research report format would have us believe (i.e. theoretical background, hypothesis, design of research instrument, data collection, test of hypothesis, findings, implications for theory). However much the idealised form of research design and presentation might be imposed on other forms of research, dialectical critical social research is not conducive to such manipulation.

Critical social research deconstructs and reconstructs. But this is not like taking a house apart brick by brick and building a bungalow using the same bricks. The exact nature of the social edifice to be deconstructed is far from clear. Oppressive social structures do not come neatly labelled and ready for dismantling. Ideology serves to obscure the real nature of the oppressive social structure by naturalising it. Reconstruction is, thus, not just rebuilding but reconceptualisation. The nature of the reconceptualisation process emerges only as the illusion of the existing taken-for-granted structure is revealed. There is a shuttling back and forth between what is being deconstructed and what is being reconstructed. The nature of both emerge together. In short, critical social research is a dialectical process that cannot be broken down into successive, discrete stages.

So what do you do as a critical researcher (as opposed to what do you say you did when reporting the research)? You have to start somewhere and there is no better place than with the observation, concern, frustration or doubt that provoked the enquiry. Ask yourself why things are as they appear to be? But frame the question, not in terms of 'what are the causes?' or 'what does this mean?' but rather as 'how come this situation exists?'. Think in terms of 'how has this come about?' and 'how does it persist?'. Ask 'how come nothing is done about it?' or 'how come no-one notices' or 'how is it that people accept

what clearly is not in their interest'? Ask such questions and from there get a clearer picture of what you are really asking about.

Asking these kinds of questions will lead you to three related lines of enquiry. First, what is essentially going on? (Pink packaging of girls toys is not about 'why is it pink', but about 'why are some toys demarcated as girls' toys?'). Second, why has this historically been the case? (Why have girls traditionally had certain toys?) Third, what structures reproduce this state of affairs? (Why do firms manufacture, and people continue to buy, these toys for girls?)

Empirical enquiry will start to provide a clearer focus for the questions. (Find out what toys are currently marketed for girls. To what extent are they traditional toys? How long has the tradition been going? What changes have occurred over time? What leads people to continue to buy traditional gender-defined toys?) Through empirical enquiry, broad abstractions can be filled out and made concrete.

Start to broaden the enquiry. Make connections between myths or contradictions that emerge from the empirical enquiry and broader stereotypes or ideological constructs. (Assumptions about girls' toys reproduce gender stereotypes. Why do these gendered myths persist? Even people who are aware of this stereotyping still buy gendered toys. Why does this anomaly occur?) Relate the myths and/or contradictions back to the empirical data, on the one hand and to broader social structures on the other. (Gendered toys are bought because children want them? Why? Because their friends have them? Because they read about gendered toys at school? Because they see advertisements for gendered toys on television? What role does the media play in reproducing gender stereotypes? How does marketing targets customers? How is gender created in the way advertisers refer to 'already constituted' subjects?).

Do not just assume relationships as the enquiry develops but undertake further empirical enquiry. (Watch the advertisements, look at school reading books, ask manufacturers about marketing strategies, etc.) Ask broader questions of the data (Do manufacturers stick to the same gendered toys because they are easier and safer to market? Why don't people demand alternatives?) Begin to reveal the nature of ideological forms, how they impinge upon the area of enquiry, and whose interests are served by them. (The elision of toys and the psychology of femininity; nurturing roles and social status; etc.) Gradually bring the specific and the societal, the immediate and the historical together in a totalistic analysis.

Avoid sweeping away the enquiry with grandiose but impotent explanations that implicate 'socialisation', 'patriarchy', 'capitalism', or 'racism'. Don't treat the world as though it is full of 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967). Critical social research is praxiological so it is necessary to examine in detail how people collude in their own oppression, how they are persuaded to reproduce historical social structures, and so on. Critical social research is close and detailed study which shows how historical oppressive social structures are legitimated and reproduced in specific practices. Critical social research thus raises consciousness, subverts the legitimating processes and provides clear analyses of the nature and operation of the oppressive structures.

So, doing critical social research is about asking 'how come?'. It involves a broad perspective. That does not mean that every study has to start with very wide view and attempt an analysis of 'capitalism' or 'patriarchy' or 'racism'. On the contrary, it is far better if a particular and specific question informs the study from the outset and is the focus of the enquiry throughout. The wider, totalistic, perspective refers to the process of locating the empirical study as part of broader structural and historical processes. It is

in contradistinction to studies that focus inwards in minute detail and detach and analyse the subject of study as an entity in itself.

Critical social research must be detailed if it is to be revealing and convincing. Empirical evidence is crucial. Such evidence may arise from asking people questions, or by watching and participating in what people do, or by reviewing what has happened in the past, or by analysing cultural products. Data may be aggregated or treated as unique testimony. It does not matter whether one computes the percentage of toys that are gendered by being packaged in pink; ask children what they want for Christmas; watch them at school and at play; discuss toy purchases with parents; decode advertisements for toys; or do a semiotic analysis of children's television. Do any or all of these things as appropriate to advancing the enquiry. But make sure that techniques are undertaken within a critical methodology. What is important is that nothing is taken-for-granted and that what is, or has been, done or said is related to historical developments and social structures.

Having done the study and gained an understanding, the production of a report is your chance to share that understanding with others. The 'traditional' approach to reporting empirical work should be avoided. This traditional approach to research reporting tends to a structure which idealises the research process as a logical sequence of discrete phases. It suggests an introduction which provides an overview of the context, a literature review, the identification of the theoretical concern of the research, the specification of hypotheses, a central block of 'results', an analysis of the results, the implications for theory, and suggestions for further research.

Instead, the critical social research report should be presented as coherent argument; a story with a plot. The details included in the final report should be interwoven into the fabric of the plot. Critical social research is primarily concerned with analysis and reporting of substantive issues rather than the artificial logic of the research process. The substantive issue is the central focus of the work and any critical social research report must indicate what central question is being addressed. A central plot must be identified and this plot sustained throughout. In effect, the core argument remains as a skeleton which is filled out by empirical details. The details are not gathered together into an inaccessible block which is subsequently interpreted for the reader, as in the conventional approach. There is no pretence, in the story approach, of inductive generalisability based on an 'objective' central block of data whose absence would be like tearing out the heart of the account and thus render the report useless. In the story approach, the data and the theory can be shown to have mutually influenced each other, the dialectical process emerges as the research angle is revealed in the plot.

5.11 An ending

In writing this book I started out with an idea of the nature of critical social research. The more I looked at critical studies and the more I tried to codify the practices the more this conception became modified. This evolving conception led me to select some studies and reject others that I had intended to use. The process of selection of studies, of analysis, of the determination of the nature of critical social research was itself dialectical. There is, however, insufficient space for me to represent this dialectical process but it is important for the reader to understand that my exposition of the nature of critical social research did not emerge inductively from the studies, nor were the studies selected to merely illustrate my preconceptions. Indeed more than half the studies included in the final document were selected and read

after I had started writing the book. This meant, apart from other things, that the introductory sections were constantly re-written as my conception of critical social research became clearer.

This book is intended to reaffirm and to endorse a major social research tradition. Although not susceptible to simple methodic prescriptions critical social research lies at the very heart of emancipatory sociological enquiry. This book, through the use of case studies, gives a clearer indication than hitherto of the nature of this fundamental critical methodological process. Unashamedly, critical social research is about the development of a critical attitude. It is a process of constant engagement with ‘neutrally’ coded messages and taken-for-granted knowledge. The researcher is an active participant in the development of knowledge, not just a recipient of already constituted knowledge. Fundamentally, the critical social researcher is dedicated to revealing and opposing oppression. If you have taken the trouble to read this book you should never rest easy again.

¹ There are similarities and overlap between critical case study and critical ethnography. However, critical ethnography clearly emphasises ethnographic techniques and forms of understanding which may or may not be the intention of the researcher using critical case study. The critical case study is also selected in order to best assess specific myths or contradictions. Unlike critical ethnography which approaches its subjects as typical of particular groups, as, for example, Willis did with his study of ‘the lads’, and as Westwood did in her study of women factory workers.

² To illustrate this, Saussure points to the analogy of a train timetable. The 8.10 from Paris is a relational concept. It is defined not in a positive sense, but negatively in terms of its relations to other trains and within the framework of a network of trains presented in abstract terms in the timetable. Nobody expects the 8.10 to comprise the same set of carriages each day, and it does not cease to be the 8.10 even if it leaves the station late every day. Identity, in short, is a function of the difference between units in a system.

³ Denotation as a noun means that which is marked or signified. As a verb, to denote means to specify, signify or point out. Connotation as a noun means that which is implied. As a verb, to connote means to imply or to betoken. The two terms are used in philosophy as follows. Denotation to refer to particulars while connotation is an abstract (dictionary) definition. Denotation in literature is in effect the generalised meaning of a word. For example, ‘pig’ denotes ‘a domesticated animal grown for its meat’. This is contrasted with connotation where ‘pig’ might connote ‘pigginess’ and applied to chauvinist males, law enforcers, and so on. The difference between the philosophical and literary meanings can be shown by another example. The term ‘rose’ denotes (in the philosophical sense) all the existing roses while the connotation (in the dictionary sense) would be the abstract definition ‘flowering shrub with thorns’. Connotation in literature relates to implied properties of a denoted object. Connotation is thus sometimes referred to as a second-order construct. This means that whereas a symbol might ‘denote’ an object (as the symbol ‘rose’ denotes a flower on a thorny stem) the same symbol may connote something further (the connotation of ‘rose’ may be ‘love’).

⁴ This is represented in the schematic diagram, below, where lower case represents the denotative level and upper case the connotative level.

Denotation

1st level	Signifier (<i>Meaning</i>)	Signified (<i>Concept</i>)
CONNOTATION	Sign	

2 nd LEVEL	SIGNIFIER <i>(FORM)</i>	SIGNIFIED <i>(CONCEPT)</i>
SIGN (SIGNIFICATION)		

Substituting 'rose/passion' in the same scheme we have

Denotation

1st level	'Rose'	attractive plant
<u>CONNOTATION</u> 2 nd LEVEL	Thorny stemmed flower SIGNIFIER <i>(FORM)</i>	PASSION <i>(CONCEPT)</i>
PASSION FILLED ROSES		

⁵ This fits in with Saussure's idea of the relational nature of language with which Jakobson concurred.