**Critical Social Science**

The final paradigm we consider here is the critical social scienceparadigm. This paradigm views sociallife as a struggle among competing individuals and groups. It is, for instance, a competition between the “haves” and the “have-nots” as in the Marxist “class struggle.” The critical social science paradigm has been labeled in various ways. Some have called it a Marxist paradigm. Others have called it a feminist paradigm. Labeling it an empowerment or advocacy paradigm might also make sense. Regardless of its name, its chief distinguishing feature is its focus on oppression and its commitment to use research procedures to empower oppressed groups. Toward that end, investigators committed to this paradigm might use highly structured or flexible research procedures or selected elements of other paradigms.

Researchers in this paradigm may use methods that are typically associated with contemporary positivists, but they are distinguished by their stance toward their findings. Contemporary positivist researchers attempt to minimize the influence of political or ideological values in interpreting their findings, as well as attempting to interpret those findings in a neutral and factual manner. Critical theorists, in contrast, set out to interpret findings through the filter of their empowerment and advocacy aims.

To illustrate this point, consider the difference between how a contemporary positivist researcher and a feminist researcher might interpret a finding that, although male social workers tend to earn more than female social workers, this difference diminishes when we compare males and females with the same job responsibilities or years of experience. The con-temporary positivist researcher, particularly one who is not well-versed in women’s issues, might conclude that this finding indicates that the influence of sexism on salaries in social work is less than many assume. The feminist researcher, however, might conclude from the same finding that sexism influences salaries through less pay for “women’s work” or by the loss of annual increments during child-rearing years.

When critical theorists use interpretive research methods, they are distinguished from interpretivists by going beyond the subjective meanings of the people they study and by their attempts to connect their observations to their a priori notion of an un-just, broader objective reality that they are seeking to change. Thus, a feminist researcher guided by the critical social science paradigm and taking an interpretive approach in the study of battered women would not stop at seeing reality through the eyes of the battered women but would also address aspects of the feminist’s vision of reality that might not be shared by the women being studied. For example, if the battered women deny or minimize the severity of the battering, find excuses for the batterer, or think they cannot leave the batterer, a feminist researcher might note the discrepancy between the women’s subjective views and the objective reality as seen by the researcher. A feminist researcher might also raise questions about the reasons for these undesirable discrepancies and attempt to derive recommendations for raising the women’s feminist consciousness and empowering them. Figure 3-3 provides an additional example of how different paradigms can influence research.

**Paradigmatic Flexibility in Research**

As you read about these paradigms, perhaps you find yourself favoring one or disliking another, but you do not have to choose one over another. Individual re-searchers may find that their investigations resemble one paradigm in one study and a different paradigm in another study—depending on what they seek to investigate. Moreover, they may find that sometimes they combine elements of more than one paradigm in the same study.

Each paradigm has its own advantages and disadvantages. We’ve discussed some of these advantages and disadvantages above. The disadvantages are most noticeable when an extremist view of a particular paradigm is championed. Early positivists, for example, were particularly vulnerable to criticism when they failed to recognize the elusive nature of social reality and the role of subjectivity. At the other extreme are postmodernists who deny the existence of an external objective social reality, who say it is unknowable, and who argue that each individual’s own subjective view of social reality is just as valid as any other’s. Those who espouse this view must contend with a different line of questioning. If an external objective social reality doesn’t exist, they may be asked, then how have they observed this to be true? If an external reality is unknowable, then how do they know that?

Although we recognize serious problems in some extremist views of certain paradigms, we do not intend to advocate the choice of one paradigm or another. Perhaps you should think of them as though they were a bag of golf clubs. Different situations call for different clubs, although there is room for experi-mentation and choice. You may finally decide that some of the clubs are seldom if ever useful. However, it would not be useful to play the whole game with just the driver or the putter. No club is inherently superior; they are each just different.

As you read this book, you may notice that it reflects contributions from different paradigms. For example, in the chapters on surveys, experiments, and statistics, you will clearly detect elements of con-temporary positivism. In the chapters on qualitative methods and measurement, you may fi nd contempo-rary positivist and interpretivist ideas. Throughout the book you will see critical social science paradigm contributions, particularly where we discuss the use of social work research to alleviate human suffering and achieve social reform.

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|  |  PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH |
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| **Paradigm** | **Research Question** | **Research Design** |
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| Positivism | Is the new policy effective in reducing | Conduct an experiment, comparing the |
|  |  | poverty? | proportion of people who move out of |
|  |  |  | poverty in areas that do and do not have |
|  |  |  | the new policy. |
|  |  |  |
| Interpretivism | How do welfare recipients experience their | Conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews, |
|  |  | lives changing under the new policy? | reporting the impact of the new policy on |
|  |  |  | their lives from the perspectives of the |
|  |  |  | welfare recipients. |
|  |  |  |
| Critical social science | Does the new policy really help the poor, or | Organize poor people to design and carry |
|  |  | does it keep them oppressed? | out their own study about the question as a |
|  |  |  | way to mobilize them and help them gather |
|  |  |  | evidence that they can use to lobby |
|  |  |  | legislators for policy changes that are less |
|  |  |  | oppressive. |
|  |  |  |
| Feminist | What impact does the new policy have on | Conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews, |
|  |  | poor women? | reporting the impact of the new policy on |
|  |  |  | their lives from the perspectives of female |
|  |  |  | welfare recipients. |
|  |  |  | Or |
|  |  |  | Organize poor women to design and carry |
|  |  |  | out their own study about the question as a |
|  |  |  | way to empower them and help them gather |
|  |  |  | evidence that they can use to lobby |
|  |  |  | legislators for policy changes that are less |
|  |  |  | oppressive to women. |
|  |  |  |  |