Theorists have more than one way to organize their observations and make sense of them. For example, liberals and conservatives explain and understand the same phenomenon quite differently due to their divergent points of view. The fundamental point of view characterizing a science is referred to as "paradigm" by Kuhn (1970)1. In natural sciences, examples of a paradigm are Newtonian mechanics, Einsteinian relativism, Darwin's evolutionary theory, and Copernicus's heliocentric theory of heavenly motion, etc. According to Kuhn, although a paradigm can become entrenched and resists change, shortcomings in a paradigm lead to an introduction of a new thinking a new paradigm. In other words, usually, a paradigm persists until it is supplanted by another one. For instance, the paradigm claiming the sun revolved around the earth was supplanted by the new paradigm that views the sun as the center of the universe and the earth moving around it. However, social science paradigms are not discarded the way natural science ones are. Instead, they present new ways of viewing the world.

Social scientists develop paradigms with a view to understanding social behavior. By the same token, communication scholars develop various paradigms to explain human communication behaviors. They offer different ways of looking at communication to make assumptions about the nature of social reality. Each approach has its own set of philosophical assumptions and principles and its own stance on how to do research (Neuman, 2003). These assumptions are not to be judged as true or false, but rather more or less useful. Communication researchers view communication in four different ways: the positivist paradigm, the systems paradigm, the interpretive paradigm and the critical paradigm. In this essay, I will elaborate on the critical paradigm of communication.

Critical scholars doubt if empirical observation is the only way to knowledge claims. Positivism is viewed as being "narrow, antidemocratic and nonhumanist in its use of reason". When they gather data, whether quantitatively or qualitatively, they do not accept the data and their analysis of those data as sufficient grounds for knowledge claims (Baxter & Babbie, 2004).

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1 The Structure of Scientific Revolution was written by Thomas Kuhn in 1970, discussing the scientific development. In this book, he disagrees with the idea of gradual change in science, and argues that established "paradigms" tend to persist until replaced by new paradigms with contradictory evidence.
According to critical knowledge claims, individuals are marginalized and disenfranchised, or do not receive adequate social justice. Furthermore, they believe critical reflection can also produce knowledge. Thus, they rely on critical reflection on those data to acquire knowledge.

Since its inception in the 1980s, critical approach derives its concept from a group of champions. Other versions of critical social science are called dialectical materialism\(^2\), class analysis, and structuralism. Moreover, critical paradigm is tied to feminist theory, radical psychotherapy, and conflict theory. The critical approach is traced to Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud and as well as later scholars such as Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse, and Paulo Freire. Creswell (2003) suggests that one of the prominent living advocate of this paradigm is Jrgen Habermas.

The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, argues social research must be reflexive; that is, it should study and criticize itself as well as its subject matter, and it is necessarily political. He also believes that the goal of research is to uncover and demystify ordinary events.

While interpretivists interpret the data with a goal of providing an accurate and complete summary of them, critical scholars question the ideological bias of the data they collect, believing there exist the implications of this bias for power relations (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Critical researchers are action-oriented, seek dramatic improvements, and conduct research in order to reveal the underlying sources of social relations and empower people.

Critical theorists believe social experience is characterized by power and ideology\(^3\). They attempt to expose the values implicit in social practices. According to critical scholars, members of a society need to be enlightened and emancipated. They usually ask about the underlying values of a given communicative situation and the ideology that serves certain interests. Critical scholars believe they are obligated to reveal implicit ideologies and power imbalances, and liberate all social agents from the oppression of the status quo, to emancipate members of a society or group. Thus, they are committed to bring social change.

The German social theorist, Karl Marx (1818–1883) analyzed history in terms of class conflict. He suggested that social behavior could best be seen as a process of conflict between capitalists (or bourgeoisie) and wage-laborers (or proletariats), the two classes whose interests are “diametrically opposed”. That is, one tries to dominate the other while, at the same time, trying to avoid being dominated. The struggle between economic classes is illustrated by the oppression of the owners of industry oppressing workers in the capitalist system.

A communication researcher might examine social class as revealed in the communication practice among members of a group. In this regard, Thai society is a class society. Class consciousness is reflected in speech interaction. Certain expressions in speech imply power and dominance. There are, for example, designated words and ways of speaking with individuals originating from various social positions. If a critical researcher tries to investigate communication patterns in Thai society, he will aim to discover, through their use of speech, how unequal members of the society are. In other words, he explores a social reality that is characterized by class and social inequality.

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\(^2\) A dialectic means a clash. Called alternatively “scientific socialism” by Hegel, and, “historical materialism” by Marx.

\(^3\) An ideology refers to a set of dominant ideas in society that forms the basis of the “public opinion” or common sense. Those whose opinions differ from the norm are seen as radical.
The goal of critical research is to empower as stated by Kincheloe & McLaren (1994) in the following text:

Critical research can be best understood in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name critical must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness. If a critical researcher conducts research investigating labeling on food packaging and finds food labeling from a brand deceptive and misleading, he does not just publish the report and wait for the Food and Drug Administration of the government to take action. The researcher instead distributes the report of his study to the press and meets with grass-roots organizations to discuss the findings. He also works with activists to mobilize actions for the sake of social justice. When people feel deceived by the food manufacturer to the extent that they flood the streets to protest against the wrong labeling, and organize a march at the government’s office demanding action, the critical researcher predicts that the manufacturer will revoke the products off the shelf and re-label them. As you can see, the purpose of research in critical paradigm is illustrated by the above example to give people power to mobilize society or to change the status quo.

Critical researchers are not afraid to ask embarrassing questions, to expose hypocrisy and to investigate conditions in order to encourage grass-roots action. As humans learn or claim knowledge through research, Sayer (1992) believes that learning is aimed to reduce “illusion and ignorance”, and that the process frees human beings from “domination by constraints, dogmas, falsehood.” In the above instance, fraudulent marketing practice is exposed through critical research approach. The issue of wrongful packaging is investigated by researchers with deep thought and critical reflection.

The critical science approach is often adopted by community action groups, political organizations, and social movements. They can use any research techniques but they typically favor the methods of qualitative research, esp. the historical-comparative method and the narrative strategy. Neuman (2003) explains that the historical-comparative study “examines aspects of social life in a past historical era or across different cultures allows a researcher to recognize change and to uncover underlying structures”. A critical researcher looks at the larger social and historical context. He might inquire from a moral-critical standpoint: Does the class system obstruct or foster overt communication in Thailand? The researcher explores many sources from different social classes to document the underlying pattern of communication and to measure the amount of overt communication. He may examine information on income differences, observe the interaction between people, or conduct surveys to find out how people really communicate.

The narrative strategy is a form of qualitative inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals. The researcher interviews individuals at some length and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. Then, the researcher retells the information and arranges it chronologically in a narrative style. In the end, the narrative combines views from the participant’s life with those of the researcher’s life in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
Since critical researchers see communication as a social arrangement of power and oppression, they respond to problems of ideology, power, and domination. Critical discourse includes such terms as ideology, dialectic, oppression, consciousness raising, resistance, and emancipation. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) summarize key features of the critical form of enquiry as follows:

1. Critical approach to knowledge claims is recursive and dialectical.
2. Critical approach to knowledge claims is change-oriented. It focuses on bringing about change in practices. At the end of studies, researchers advance an action agenda for change.
3. Critical approach to knowledge claims is issue-oriented. Critical studies often begin with an important issue or stance about the problems in society, such as the need for empowerment.
4. Critical approach to knowledge claims is emancipatory. Critical studies aim to unshackle people from the constraints of irrational and unjust structures that limit self-development and self-determination. These constraints are found in the media, in language, in work procedures, and in the relationships of power in educational settings.
5. Critical approach to knowledge claims is practical and collaborative. Researchers engage the participants as active collaborators in their inquiries.
6. Critical approach to knowledge claims creates critical atmosphere in society in the form of debates and discussions.

REFERENCES


