

## **CRITIQUE AND CRITICAL THEORY IN INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY- WHAT IS IT? WHERE IS IT?**

**Miss Tasnim Bibi Kazi**

*Academic Lecturer at Regent Business School, South Africa*

**Miss Vartikka Indermun**

*Academic Lecturer at Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA), South Africa*

### **Abstract**

Despite the growing popularity in closely-related disciplines such as Organisational Science (OS), a critical or post-structuralist viewpoint of Industrial Psychology (IP) has largely been ignored. Mainstream or traditional IP is generally concerned with maximising performance and increasing profits in organisations, taking a managerial bias, and inclining towards those who hold positions of power. However, while they have been preoccupied with this, a ‘dark side’ of organisational existence has emerged. This ‘dark side’ can be described as one that “stifles the individual, frustrates the attainment of certain desired social ends and threatens to distort many core values of democratic societies”. Before addressing mainstream IP, issues that lends itself to a more critical rather than mainstream approach, and how there may be a shift to or creation of a more critical IP, it may be useful to briefly examine some central ideas of critical and post-structuralist theory for a more inclusive understanding.

Keywords: Critical theory, industrial psychology, mainstream, traditional.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Critical theory can be differentiated from mainstream theory in that it seeks human emancipation, to liberate individuals from enslaving circumstances (Bohman, 2008). According to Jermier (1998: 236), this necessitates an “examination of the structures of control in society and of the political implications of academic work”. Critical theorists generally adopt a standpoint that challenges the status quo in society. A classic theme in critical theory is the mistreatment of certain individuals and groups through the misuse of power, and it is derived from Marx’s concept of exploitation in capitalist societies:

Within the capitalist system all the methods for increasing the social productiveness of labour are carried out at the cost of the individual worker: [the methods] mutilate the worker into a fragment of a human being... make his work such a torment that its essential meaning is destroyed; [they] distort the conditions under which he works, subjecting him, during the labour-process, to a despotism ... they transform his whole life into working

time, and drag his wife and children beneath the wheels of capital's car (Jermier, 1998, 236-237)

In critical theory, social injustice and oppression replaces the technical term of exploitation. Furthermore, this theory is sensitive to more subtle and newer forms of control, explained by Marcuse as a "comfortable, smooth, reasonable democratic *unfreedom*" (Jermier, 1998: 237). In critical theory, knowledge is not neutral and science plays an integral part in struggles for control, with social science often taking sides while at the same time stressing impartiality in the name of science (Jermier, 1998). An example would be the managerial bias that industrial psychologists take in organisations. So, while critical theory is largely concerned with ideology, poststructuralist theory is related to discourse.

The central tenet in poststructuralist theory is the belief that there is nothing outside of language, it is "what 'makes' or constructs our world... everything is constructed by the way we name it... our conscious and unconscious minds, our world, our histories and our values and morals are constructed by the words we use and the ways in which we use those words" (Holloway, Byrne & Titlestad, 2001: 46). Discourse is the use of language and poststructuralists believe that those in power in society control and distribute discourse thereby establishing their discourse as rational and leading to it being the dominant source of truth in society. This idea of domination and hierarchies is rejected by poststructuralists, who aim to deconstruct these beliefs through the use of language, opting instead "to expose these relations and the dependency of the dominant term on its apparently subservient counterpart" (en.wikipedia.org).

Mainstream organisational theory or the 'dark side', according to Abel (2005: 500), is based on concepts of determinism, generalization, rationality, efficiency and productivity, and because of these they seek ways of separating the organisation from external factors that may disturb its functioning by removing behavior that lead to such disturbances. In other words, there is a focus on ways in which "organisations might control managers, the productive capacity of employees and the impact of environmental variables". Mainstream theory has been instrumental in creating the social knowledge that helps establish power relations thereby shaping societal norms, practices and behaviors. Still, even as they participate in this society, organisations are regarded as separate from it; this marginalisation is a direct result of individualism.

The consequence of such individualism involves the pursuit "of whatever power is necessary to secure organisational interests... against whatever resistance is encountered from either their external environments or those that they employ... [Thus] a familiar concept of power as involving force, conflict and domination prevails" (Abel, 2005: 502). Early movements such as scientific management and human relations depict different forms of this power, the former displaying a dominance-oriented approach focused on authoritarian, hierarchical control, while the latter used subtle and less dominant forms of control in terms of psychological manipulation, incentives and self-discipline. Thus, there was a movement from the traditional sense of power, to the expanded belief of the ability of power to operate 'unseen' (Abel, 2005). When power did not work as effectively in these ways, there was a move to systems and contingency organisational theories. Here is another expansion on the concept of power and how it may dominate, that is, organisational power here is "ultimately an attribute of total systems that locate power differentially in social roles" (Abel, 2005: 505).

The topics that IP deals with, such as psychometrics, job analysis, selection, training and utility analysis, has led to the field focusing on the precise measurement and prediction of its constructs and has resulted in many methodological gains. However, there is hardly any focus given to the assumptions underlying these gains, and this may have stemmed from either the application of IP findings and/or its' objective study (Islam & Zyphur, 2006).

The major journals of IP such as the Journal of Applied Psychology and Personnel Psychology have a highly applied focus and stress that not only is the application of IP of utmost importance, but the application to increasing organisational performance and profit. IP scholars have disregarded whether or not this is a good idea, as they continuously focus on improving testing procedures, increasing the validity of these and maximising profit and performance. A "management myopia" is the outcome and a direct result of the epistemology of IP.

The problem is not about the issues that IP studies but the standpoint they adopt in relation to these, a standpoint which largely reflects a managerial bias. The management myopia is therefore when research "assumes the position of management, informing decisions of management and worrying about management concerns" (Islam & Zyphur, 2006: 23). An example of this can be provided with job satisfaction where the main issue is to link satisfaction with performance. To study satisfaction on its own, irrespective of whether or not it improves performance is uncommon in IP.

The epistemology of IP is based on the positivist belief that there is an external and objective reality that can be properly measured if objective and standardised instruments are used (Steffy & Grimes, 1992; Islam & Zyphur, 2006). IP uses 'latent' variables for measurement as these are thought to be real but not directly measurable, resulting in IP adopting a strong methodological focus. Quantification is used to support hypotheses and it is often overlooked that behind quantification lays an epistemological foundation. Islam and Zyphur (2006) argue that this epistemological choice of objectification and quantification is a result of unquestioned political dynamics in IP, and that positivism helps maintain a managerial bias and top-down power relations. Steffy and Grimes (1992) elaborate on this stating that an important part of all this is the validation procedures; all constructs and theories must show external, internal and construct validity. Problems then arise when a construct becomes questionable. The authors give the example of recent popular constructs in personnel selection such as honesty/integrity and cognitive style which are questionable: their definitions and measures can be deficient or contaminated in that varying definitions can be imposed on the construct depending on the analyst, the process of analysis, or methods and procedures.

Drawing from all of the above, Steffy and Grimes (1992: 188) discuss the reasons for a call for a more critical approach to the field: there is a wide gap between theory and practice; only the most common sense theories are consistently supported; majority of the research focuses on static instead of dynamic issues like power, conflict, politics and ideology; and the current methodology provides only fragmented explanations that do little to help one understand the complexities of organisational life. They state that it is personnel/organisational studies (POP) epistemological tactics that decide its' knowledge products which, as Foucault further suggests, will "support organisational products that reflect the naïve assumption underlying epistemological strategies and tactics and hence, adversely delimit the self at work".

The authors explore how a more critical perspective can be approached with reference to level of analysis and subject matter domain (Steffy & Grimes, 1992). Level of analysis in the social sciences can be described as either macro or micro with POP adhering to a micro level, focusing on the individual actor or organisation. As a result of this, large and important components of real world phenomena are being ignored, and there is a restriction on ontology which leads to partial explanations, biased knowledge products, discounting of large spheres of organisational reality and a de-emphasis of issues such as conflict, class, politics and power. It is suggested, in order to be more critical, a serious attempt should be made to integrate micro and macro levels of analyses so that structural and social constraints and factors are taken into consideration.

With regard to subject matter domain, POP falls into the epistemological discipline of biology. However, if a modern discipline such as POP does not incorporate analysis and subject matter from the other two regions of economics and philology then it is ontologically biased and representative of a delimited and lacking worldview. Steffy and Grimes (1992: 189) suggest researchers “should critique how well POP has incorporated material from the economic/social and philological sciences”.

Steffy and Grimes (1992) also address the co-dependence of knowledge products and organization practice and the implications this has had on keeping POP mainstream. By addressing this they provide issues which calls for a more critical POP. For example, the knowledge products of POP make it possible for surveillance and gaze to exert power on the employee. Narrow, delimiting tactics such as objective measurement systems, reductionist analytical models, and data collection and storage, influence organizational practice which then inform administrative decisions. As a result, the “organization is objectifying the self... increasing as a result of the methodological and epistemological problems inherent in a neo-positivist POP” (Steffy and Grimes, 1992: 191).

In response to this there has been a differentiation into more subfields and focus areas in the field. This has had no impact on broadening the epistemology or expanding analysis, rather it has further constricted and delimited POP. The more refined measurement systems and narrower theories that are left “ignore the real world complexities of organisation life and magnify and focus the organization’s gaze and surveillance” (Steffy & Grimes, 1992: 191).

Steffy and Grimes (1992: 192) suggest that the solution may not lie in refined systems but rather in “replacing behaviourally based measurement procedures with participatory techniques emphasising mutually established social contracts, for example management by objectives”. The same surveillance and documentation procedures also result in a subtle coercion or domination of the human body. Not only is the body, or individual, assigned a place in the structure of the organisation, but he or she is also controlled through processes such as internal staffing and external selection which places them in competitive queues (Steffy & Grimes, 1992).

Furthermore, the individual is also encouraged to work toward physical and emotional stress and burnout through the form of incentives and pay increases which encourages hard work without consideration to the effects this has on the human body. Thus, there is a conflict between the work and self and an indication of how organisational practices and its’ knowledge products play a major role in this conflict, “forcing the self to adjust itself to the work, and not vice versa” (Steffy & Grimes, 1992: 193).

Before addressing a critical IP, or a movement beyond the mainstream with respect to Abel (2005), a brief explanation on Foucault's power/knowledge is important. According to Foucault, human beings are made subjects in two ways (Holloway et al., 2001). First, by becoming subjects of scientific study, like in psychology and medicine. Second, through the processes by which they allow themselves to be governed. The use of the word subject can be understood by Foucault's explanation of the inseparability of knowledge and power: The exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information... the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power... It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power (Townley, 1993: 521).

If this position is accepted than objectivity is no longer possible, because power relations present in society determine truth. In addition, since everyone is embedded in power relations, no position is free from expressions of power and all 'truth' statements are determined by power and result in power (Holloway et al., 2001).

This relationship between power and knowledge is described by Abel (2005: 510) who suggests that the 'dark side' of organisations "predominates only insofar as the patterns of dominance, resistance and discourse through which it is accomplished remain 'unexamined totalising assumptions' that are 'taken for granted' as simply 'the natural convention'". Because power privileges certain knowledge, the same knowledge allows power to be exerted in a way that guarantees conformity to the dominant 'truth'. But with power comes the possibility of resistance and challenging the status quo. The subjectivities and identities of individuals are a result of the dynamics of domination and resistance, [re]constructed by the discourses within the workplace; employees construct their identity in relation or opposition to dominant organisational discourse (Townley, 1993).

It is a common or shared economy of power that decides this, that is; individual and organisational interests, goals and values are not decided by themselves but are conceived of through this shared conceptions and thought. These make up the social reality of individuals and organisation, which together with its dark side can be dispelled through change or resistance by the individuals or the organisation. Foucault further argues that "organisations can play positive roles in advancing social and individual interests through the knowledge its existence produces" (Abel, 2005: 512).

Islam and Zyphur (2006: 24) discuss Foucault's argument that measurement and control, popular in IP, are powerful tools of control "because they reduce the potentially infinite complexity of social behavior into discrete units that can be administered" and that this results in the transformation of "dynamic and complex human relations into discrete and measurable human 'resources'". These discrete units can be manipulated in favour of the organization without any ethical reservation. Within IP, objectification of workers is seen as essential in order to validate conceptual schemes, but Foucault views objectification in relation to the techniques of enclosure, partitioning and ranking (Islam & Zyphur, 2006).

Enclosure is where a social space is defined so that actions can be considered without reference to context. For example, a business sphere is different from a personal/ethical sphere and justification of actions in the business sphere can be referred to as 'just business'. When each sphere, like the organization is broken up into independent units each with its own incentives, roles and goals, incompatible to another unit's culture, it is referred to as partitioning. Ranking is evaluation, testing and placement activities in organizations, "not

based on natural right or on predestined caste but on 'scientific' principles which give a legitimating veneer to unequal access to resources and authority" (Islam & Zyphur, 2006:25). The social consequences of this are largely ignored as it is believed a necessity of business.

Following from this, Islam and Zyphur (2006) suggest that in the attempt to create a critical perspective on IP, one should look at the social construction in IP and the field's ethical concerns. A construct is an idea or concept with a thorough definition. The field of IP is largely made up of widely agreed upon 'acceptable' constructs, as these are the only constructs that IP journals will take into account, thereby indicating the political nature of IP. Besides journals, there are other support mechanisms in place for the literature of IP, which means that IP is filling a social function. In other words, it does not exist only because it is objective but because of the many institutional mechanisms that are in place to support its existence.

IP literature, the discursive space wherein IP reality is constructed by IP academic scholars, is largely focused on organisational application (in terms of increased performance and profit) and in this way acts as management 'agents'. That is, it is the academics that provide management with the tools "to legitimise power relations by discussing them in terms of scientific facts" (Islam & Zyphur, 2006: 26), and who further serve to disguise power relations. In return, the academics are rewarded by their theories being legitimised as being practical because of the role it plays within the organisation in terms of the contribution that it makes toward the success of the organisation.

While the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) provides ethical and legal guidelines for IP, there are no guidelines for critical IP. It is suggested that critical IP should not only focus on profit and performance, but on institutional, social, personal and environmental aspects of the field, in both consultation and academia. Critical IP needs to be reflexive, asking of itself whether it is affecting harm or doing good, so that it may be beneficial to the employees. Islam & Zyphur (2006) state that they are not suggesting that an applied psychology is 'wrong' or that critical psychology is 'right'. Rather, their critical IP is essentially a call for a socially responsible application of the field. In addition, if IP considers this, then the use of IP technologies for benefit can be manifold.

## **CONCLUSION**

By criticising the above issues, topics and paradigms governing mainstream or traditional IP, these authors have presented a way in which mainstream and traditional IP and organisational theory can move beyond the mainstream and incorporate or adopt a more critical perspective and approach, thereby creating a critical Industrial Psychology. Islam & Zyphur (2006: 27) conclude: "We believe that the loss of absolute epistemological certainty is well worth the investment in a critical perspective. For only when the claims of objective validity made in traditional I/O research are submitted to criticism can the social relations underlying these claims be brought to light".

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