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Emancipation in cross-cultural IS research: The fine line between relativism and dictatorship of the intellectual

Bernd Carsten Stahl
Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH, UK
E-mail: bstahl@dmu.ac.uk

Abstract. Critical research is becoming increasingly accepted as a valid approach to research in information systems. It is deemed to be particularly suitable for situations where researchers want to address conspicuous injustice, such as in areas of development or the digital divide. Critical research in information systems (CRIS), I will argue, is a possible approach to some of the ethical problems arising in the context of information and communication technology (ICT). It can be sensitive to the question of culture and therefore suitable for researching cross-cultural ethical questions in ICT. It is often unclear, however, what exactly critical research stands for and to what extent critical approaches are applicable across cultural boundaries. This paper will address these problems by proposing a definition of critical research as focused on changing the status quo and aiming for emancipation. It will then look at the question whether different cultures are compatible and comparable and what the role of culture in research on information systems is. The paper will then return to the question whether the critical intention to emancipate and empower humans is an expression of cultural imperialism or whether there are valid ways of promoting emancipation across cultural divides.

Key words: critical research, cross-cultural research, culture, emancipation, information systems

Introduction

Critical research has long been recognised as one possible approach to research in information systems (IS). At the same time, it is not always clear what constitutes critical research. In this paper I will put forward a definition of critical research that centres on its intention to change the status quo and make a difference. I will furthermore argue that the central expression of the critical intention is its aim to promote emancipation or empowerment. In the light of this critical intention, critical research is usually aimed at certain topics that allow for the realisation of the emancipatory aim.

The emancipatory intention thus leads critical researchers to seek out those issues that are perceived to be unjust and in need of change. Critical research in information systems is in many ways closely related to questions of computer and information ethics (cf. Bell and Adam 2004). It addresses many of the same issues and encounters similar problems but often without explicitly referring to ethics and moral philosophy. One example of an area of overlapping interest is the question of distribution and digital divides. Others would include questions of power, the status of human beings, or gender issues. When doing research in this area, the researcher is often confronted with the vast inequalities that exist between different countries or between different groups within and between countries. The attempt to apply the critical emancipatory intention in such circumstances where there are more than one predominant culture, is at the heart of this paper. My central question is: is there anything culturally invariant about emancipation? The importance of this question is easily understood. Since critical research wants to make a difference, the critical researcher needs to have a clear idea as to which difference he or she wants to make and why. If emancipation is universal and culturally invariant, then the researcher might draw up a desirable path to emancipation and, if the research subjects follow the path, emancipation will be realised and the research can be considered successful.

However, most critical researchers will be suspicious of such a simplistic approach. One reason for this is the problem of the cross-cultural validity of

perceptions of moral reality. What counts as good and desirable in one cultural setting may be bad and deplorable in the next. How are we to know that our understanding of emancipation is viewed as providing real emancipation by the people we are trying to emancipate? History provides us with a wealth of examples that warn against the dangers of the good will to improve people's lot – i.e., as these instances backfire and sometimes only worsen peoples' lives and circumstances. The most salient instance of this is certainly that of communism/socialism as embodied in the former Warsaw Pact countries. It was based on Marxist critique of capitalism, which is still an important basis of critical research, but it arguably did not achieve its aim of emancipation. How are contemporary researchers to avoid falling into a similar trap?

The answer to this question that the current paper suggests is to reflect on the possibility or necessity of emancipation as a central moral notion of critical research. Based on a social constructivist understanding of reality, I do not believe that value-neutral research from a detached observer's point of view is possible. Instead, all research always and necessarily has consequences for the research object as well as the researcher. However, not only active interventions will have consequences. The same is true for the failure to act and intervene, which will have conservative consequences by preserving the status quo. The question therefore cannot be whether to intervene or not, but rather how to intervene in a benevolent way. This requires a reflexive understanding of research and I will use Habermas's framework of the theory of communicative action (TCA) to suggest a way forward. The TCA elaborates on the validity claims contained in all utterances and the ideal speech situation which is used to validate agreement or disagreement on these claims. This theoretical framework allows the understanding of emancipation as a procedural act, which can be justified for a wide range of cultural and moral contexts but which does not prejudice the material form emancipation can or should take. Emancipation can therefore be seen as a desirable objective of research that justifies the researcher's intervention. At the same time the procedural approach avoids the danger of forcing the researcher's moral norms onto people and situations where they would not be appropriate and instead turn into a sort of dictatorship of the researcher.

In order to develop this argument, I will start out the paper by reviewing the debate on critical research in information systems. This will support my contention that critical research is concerned with making a difference and emancipation. In the subsequent section I will define the concept of culture and, following that, I will review the importance of culture in the area of information and communication technology (ICT). This will lead to a discussion of what, if anything, is universal about culture. The paper will conclude with a discussion whether the emancipatory nature of the critical intention driving critical research is valid across cultural boundaries and how critical researchers can address this difficult question without succumbing to either relativism or cultural imperialism.

Critical research

Critical research has long been seen as a possible alternative to positivist or interpretivist research in business studies, including IS (Chua 1986; Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). However, very few IS scholars have actually conducted critical research. This situation seems to be changing at the moment with several special journal issues, special conferences, and conference streams in established conferences being published. While the appeal of critical research in IS seems to broaden, the profile of the approach becomes less clear. There are a number of calls to pluralism in critical research that are supposed to address a perceived stranglehold of certain theoretical approaches (notably Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action) on the field. The unintended side effect of such increasing pluralism in terms of admissible theories, epistemologies and methodologies is that there are now a number of different approaches labelled "critical" (cf. Brooke 2002a) and it is hard to see what the essence of critical research is supposed to be.

History and characteristics of critical research

In order to understand the main arguments of critical research and to appreciate the problem of cultural universality versus particularity in CRIS, it is helpful to take a look at the development of this particular stream of thought. Critical research is inspired by the Marxist view that the history of all prior societies is the history of class struggles (Marx 1969). It is therefore sensitive to historical developments. More importantly, it shares the conflictual view of society and is fundamentally suspicious of capitalism, which it sees as intrinsically contradictory and problematic (Hirschheim and Klein 1989). There are several theoretical developments based on Marxist thoughts, which continue to inspire and guide critical theory (Alvesson and Deetz 2000), including the Frankfurt School and feminist critique of capitalist patriarchy (Nord and Jermier 1992).

Based on this conflictual view of society and on the related belief that society in its current form is unjust, critical research aims to change the *status quo*. This I believe to be the most important defining characteristic of critical research: it is not content with accepting society as it is, but it aims to change society. The aim of such change is to make a better society and to overcome injustices. Critical research therefore "generally aims to disrupt ongoing social reality for the sake of providing impulses to the liberation from or resistance to what dominates and leads to constraints in human decision making" (Alvesson and Deetz, p. 1). Again, this desire to change the world is based on Marx's thoughts who believed that philosophers had only interpreted the world, where it in fact was important to change it (Marx 1964, p. 141).

If the critical intention to change social reality is at the heart of critical research, then the researcher must ask himself or herself how this can best be achieved. An important aspect is to develop an adequate and novel understanding of the situation in which the research object as well as the researcher find themselves. Critical research needs to consider how current situations are historically situated in order to recognise discursive closures that prevent changes. Only such historical awareness allows for the development of an understanding why some issues are open to debate in a given society at a given time, while others are not. Examples of this include gender roles or the understanding of homosexuality, which in current western societies are debatable but at other times and in other places were and are taboos. This also means that critical researchers need to have some idea of what a just society would look like, which is the problem at the heart of this paper. Before we can come to the discussion how critical researchers can determine an appropriate view of the good society, we can state that they need to have one and that it often runs counter to what society in general will see as acceptable (Jermier and Forbes 2003). Because of this critical intention and the implicit vision of the good life in a desirable society, critical research is intrinsically ethical. It is based on (explicit or implicit) normative premise that life can and should be improved. Critical research is thus based on values (cf. Walsham 1993).

One important problem of critical research is its *philosophical foundation*. I have indicated earlier that it is often depicted as the third alternative, next to positivist and interpretivist research. I won't be able to do justice here to the debate between these different research approaches or "paradigms". Suffice it to say that I believe that they are at heart ontological positions, which translate into certain theoretical and methodological conclusions. Positivism is based on the realist ontology which posits that reality is independent of the observer, whereas interpretivism is constructivist or constructionist in believing that reality is a social construct. The critical intention can be promoted in both of these worldviews. However, current critical research seems to be predominantly constructivist in its ontological leaning. This means that critical researchers hold the world to be the result of social interaction and it implies that language as the constitutive element of social interaction must be high on the list of areas of interest. Consequently, critical research displays a high affinity to such research theories and methodologies that are sensitive to language and its use in the social construction of reality.

A resulting question is that of *research methodology* and of the *importance and interpretation of empirical research*. While business research (of which CRIS is often considered to be a part), in the tradition of social sciences, emphasises the importance of empirical observations, critical researchers tend to be more careful about the value of empirical research. First, empirical research can only show us what the world is like, and for critical research that is at most only one part of what it aims to achieve. More importantly, in a constructivist worldview, research is part of the social construction of reality. Objective observation is impossible and it is therefore open to question what the purpose of observation is supposed to be.

A final aspect of critical research worth mentioning is its *reflexivity*. Critical research is not only critical of the outside world but also of its own existence and assumptions. It therefore tries to flesh out its hidden agendas and biases (Cecez-Kecmanovic 2001). It is aware of the possibility being misused for purposes running counter to its critical intention (Alvesson and Willmott 1992). It also reflects on the consistency of its theoretical underpinnings, ontological beliefs and methodological approaches.

Emancipation

If this account and overview of critical research is acceptable, and the critical intention to make the world a better place is the central tenet of critical research, then we must ask what it means to achieve this intention. Critical research has addressed this question by promoting the idea of emancipation. Briefly, critical research aims to empower its research subjects and to improve society by providing individuals with means of emancipation. But again, what does this mean? How can one empower people and what is the role of research in this process? Answers to this question are usually given on a high level of

abstraction or with regards to some plausible *prima facie* solutions to specific problems.

Very generally, emancipation stands for the process of overcoming external constraints. Oates (2004) implicitly equates empowerment with human flourishing. Others see the aim of emancipation as the overcoming of unjust and inequitable conditions (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997). According to Klein and Huynh (2004, p. 163), emancipation means "that more people can achieve their potential to a greater degree". Hirschheim and Klein (1994) suggest that emancipation has two dimensions: the individual and psychological one of feeling emancipated, and the organisational one which refers to the social conditions within which the individual finds itself.

This sort of definition probably captures what most of us think of when we hear the word "emancipation". It is problematic, however, because it is highly idiosyncratic. If we reduce emancipation to individual feelings of flourishing or achieving one's potential, then it is difficult to determine and easy to misuse. For example, emancipation could then be realised by taking away individuals' perception of their potential. It also means that two individuals with identical abilities in identical circumstances may be at different stages of emancipation simply because they have different views of themselves and their aims in life. To some degree that is not problematic for critical research because it does not subscribe to objective reality anyway. Different constructions of reality are perfectly acceptable in different circumstances. However, this leads us directly into the problem of complete relativism. One can make the case, for example, that some people will best live up to their potential as slaves or in prisons. If these people agree with such a narrative, then emancipation would be given in such circumstances. But if ethical relativism leads to such clearly problematic results, there is surely something mistaken about it.

Another problem of the fuzzy concept of emancipation is that it relates to a large number of external or internal circumstances. To name just some that can be found in the literature: Emancipation is related to education (Dawson and Newman 2002). It has something to do with the way the individuals can live their lives, the way they that suits their personality best and thus with authenticity (Probert 2002; Hirschheim and Klein 1994). Authenticity is closely related to individual identity and identity, individual and social, is thus an important aspect of emancipation (Forester 1992). One aim of emancipation is to facilitate the development of a sound and reflected identity. Such authentic identity is only likely to develop on the condition of freedom (Howcroft and Trauth 2004), so that emancipation can be understood to promote the idea of freedom from internal as well as external constraints. One important factor that leads to alienation, lack of freedom and authenticity is the predominant purposive rationality that we use to describe and understand the world. Emancipation is thus often understood as a challenge on this purposive rationality and aims to broaden our understanding of rationality (Burrell and Dale 2003; Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. 2002; Levy et al. 2003).

There are a number of examples of critical research in IS that attempt to realise the emancipatory intention (e.g., McAulay et al. 2002). Many of them start at the early phases of the systems development life cycle and try to promote the emancipatory interest by allowing emancipatory practices to inform the development of the system. Many of these approaches are built around Habermas's idea of the ideal speech situation and they try to emulate emancipatory systems design by allowing wide-spread participation (Hirschheim and Klein 1994; Wilson 1997; Trauth 2001). In practice this can often be translated in a stakeholder approach to systems development (Ulrich 2001).

Other examples of critical and emancipatory research focus on different topics. Since critical research wants to make a difference and perceives society as less than optimal, most critical research is interested in such topics that display the problems of alienation and lack of emancipation and that promise a chance to change them. The most important topic in this direction is that of power (Brooke 2002a). Power in critical research is a multi-facetted idea that ranges from traditional the top–down ability to coerce to a Foucauldian web of interdependencies (Mingers 1992; Walsham 2001). The interest in power leads to an interest in politics, which again is usually seen as a fairly wide term. It can refer to the traditional arena of party politics and government but usually concerns organisational politics. Critical research, given its Marxist tradition, is typically interested in capitalism (Saravanamuthu 2002), particularly in current developments of capitalism under the conditions of globalisation, a phenomenon that Fairclough (2003) calls "new capitalism". Furthermore, the issue of purposive rationality plays a central role in critical IS research (Varey et al. 2002). Finally, there are a number of critical studies in IS that look at problems of emancipation in contexts where ICT plays a role in disempowering people. These topics include traditional IS research areas such as IS failure (Wilson 2003) or strategy (Ciborra 2000). Other areas of interest to critical researchers are problems of the digital divide (Kvasny and Trauth 2003), gender issues (Kvasny et al. 2005) and other areas where people are disempowered or

alienated. These last few examples lead us to the application area in question in this paper, namely to research that takes place in settings where cultural homogeneity is not to be expected.

Cross-cultural research in ICT

In this section I will firstly define the concept of culture and then briefly review some of the areas where culture is of relevance for research on ICT.

The concept of culture

Defining culture is a highly ambitious endeavour and, due to the multitude of possible definitions from different disciplines (cf. Rey 2001), it is not likely to be successful. The current definition of culture is thus based on the literature that refers to questions of the relationship of ICT and culture. It does not claim to cover all possible aspects of culture.

The central aspect of culture for our purposes has to do with shared meanings and interpretations. It "refers to the socially learned behaviors, beliefs, and values that the members of a group or society share" (Maitland and Bauer 2001, p. 88). Walsham (2002, p. 362) defines culture, at its most basic level as "shared symbols, norms, and values in a social collectivity such as a country". Values and norms can only be shared on the basis of a common understanding of some basic factor such as the nature of human beings, the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, etc. Culture is thus a set of fundamental shared assumptions that allow the members of the culture to understand each other. Culture is based on communication and is expressed through symbolic interaction (Walsham 1993; Ward and Peppard 1996; Castells 2000).

Such a shared set of symbols is necessary for the functioning of any group or society. It contains a number of assumptions and explicit as well as implicit rules. This includes some sort of shared morality (Ricoeur 1983). As Robey and Azevedo (1994, p. 26) put it, "[...] the distinctive feature of culture is its normative character; culture guides people in the correct ways to think, feel, and act."

While culture can thus be described as the set of shared meanings and interpretations of a group, one of the central problems is that no group ever agrees on all interpretations and meanings. Furthermore, most individuals are members of different groups that share different cultures. One aspect of this is the difference between national and organisational culture. These different cultures can be similar but they can also be contradictory. They are also locally situated and subject to ongoing negotiations (Weisinger and Trauth 2002). For researchers, it is thus difficult to materially describe a culture because it can never be captured completely and it evolves during, and sometimes because of, the research activity.

Finally, critical researchers face another problem with culture, namely the fact that culture is also the anchor of ideology. Culture contains those ideological assumptions that critical researchers find problematic and try to expose. It is at least partly on the basis of culture that people are exploited, dominated, and alienated (cf. Schultze and Leidner 2002).

An important aspect of culture in this paper is its relationship to technology. If we follow Gehlen (1997, cf. Höffe 1995) in his description of human beings as tool-using animals, then it is clear that culture must be related to technology. Human beings require technology (in the widest sense of the word) to survive and thrive. Technology is therefore an important part of the symbolic universe that surrounds humans and thus an integral part of culture. The type of technology we use and the purposes we use it for are in large parts determined by our culture. Conversely, cultures can be classified by the type of technologies they use (Postman 1992).

Universality versus particularity of culture

The central question of this paper is whether the idea of emancipation is applicable across cultural boundaries. In order to be able to discuss this question in depth, it is important to consider whether there is anything that all cultures have in common. If this is not the case, then it stands to reason that the concept of emancipation developed in one culture will simply not be applicable to other cultures and cross-cultural critical research is faced with a serious problem. There are two possible answers to the question whether cultures have something in common, which I will call universality and particularity.

It is plain to see that cultures differ. Our interpretations and symbolic interactions are endowed with different meanings, which are often hard to translate. A good example familiar to most readers is that of academic cultures. In academia many people find it hard to interact with members of other academic sub-communities, simply because concepts are used differently and there are different expectations levelled at validity claims. The current paper is probably a case in point since the central concepts, 'critical research' and 'culture' will be defined differently in different disciplines. These different cultures may diverge to the point that successful communication becomes impossible. The point of view of particularity is that these differences run so deep that

there is nothing all cultures have in common. There is no common root that we could agree on, given the factual differences between cultures.

If one subscribes to such a strong view of particularity of culture, then one has to admit that in many cases communication will not be possible and the best one can hope for is that the lack of mutual understanding will not lead to outright war. However, such a hope would not be well founded. There are proponents of such a strong view of particularity, for example Huntington and his concept of the clash of civilisations (Huntington 1993), which at its base is a clash of cultures in our terminology. Another observation that might support a strong view of particularity is that different cultures have different moral and ethical systems which often seem to be irreconcilable. One culture may believe in forgiveness and loving one's enemies whereas the next may prescribe revenge. Moral codes, for example with regards to sexuality, are so different that they seem to suggest incompatibility.

On the other hand, such a strong view of cultural particularity is difficult to sustain in the light of the fact that – despite all difficulties – we are able to communicate across cultural barriers. This is true on a national level where there have always been interlopers between cultures who were conversant in different interpretative schemes as well as on a local or organisational level. With a bit of good will, it is possible for the physicist to understand the sociologist, at least to the point where one can agree on disagreement. Another empirical phenomenon that supports the idea of universality of at least some aspects of culture is globalisation (Beck 1998). We seem to live in a world that is becoming more and more homogeneous. This may in some parts be the result of cultural imperialism (McDonaldisation of the world – e.g., Barber 1995) but such cultural imperialism can only work on the basis that some aspects of culture can be translated.

One reason why there may be universals that underlie cultures despite their material differences are universal aspects of human nature. One universal aspect of humans seems to be that we have a culture, however different the cultures may be. We need a symbolic environment that allows us to grasp and interact with our world. One could call humans the cultured animal (cf. Lenoir 1991; Weber 1994). We also share other aspects that are part of being a human. From an existentialist viewpoint, one can underline the facts that we are bodily beings who live in a world structured by communication. We can recognise the other as someone who is fundamentally similar to us and who deserves respect. We also know of our coming death and can sympathise with others on the basis of these shared aspects of existence. This is the basis of existentialist ethical positions from Sartre to Levinas. Elsewhere (Stahl and El-Beltagi 2004) we have used a Habermasian framework to argue that there are universals that all cultures share. These include the fact that culture is a human constant, that cultures are communicatively constructed and that they have to consider the human nature as being-in-the-word (to use a Heideggerian term).

Culture, research and ICT

Given everything that was said so far, it is plain to see that there are interdependencies between culture, ICT, and research (Trauth and O'Connor 1991). ICT is part of the technology that forms an integral part of all cultures. It thus provides us with our background knowledge of shared meanings. At the same time culture influences the way we perceive and use technology, including ICT. Both aspects have been discussed in the research literature on ICT and IS.

The influence of ICT on organisational culture is a central part of IS research. Computers and other means of ICT have had an important impact on the way we organise work and the way organisations in general are run (Himanen 2001). These changes run so deep that ICT has been likened to other central inventions like the steam engine (Floridi 1999). ICT is often used as a means to produce change intentionally, which is why it is linked to change management approaches such as business process reengineering.

The influence of ICT on organisational as well as national culture goes beyond such instrumental uses, however. Given that culture is about shared interpretations and symbolic interaction, the use of and familiarity with ICT offers new ways of conceptualising the world. The wide-spread use of a highly logical and formal technology thus supports a technological and logical view of reality. This supports the instrumental rationality that underlies capitalism. At the same time, it offers a way of interpreting human behaviour in terms of machines (Weizenbaum 1976). The ICT that we observe in the western democracies is thus a supporting influence on the organisation of society. An important aspect of this is capitalism which is partly facilitated and expanded by technology (Castells 2000). ICT thus provides a metaphor that allows us to reinterpret our environment. This includes the basic constituents of our world, including our view of humans and ontological constructions such as the nature of god and religion (Berne 2003; Ess 2001).

This influence of ICT on culture is certainly not one-sided. Since our actions are structured by the culturally transmitted symbolic universe we live in,

the use of technology depends on cultural beliefs. The very definition of what we believe technology (and ICT) to be depends on culture. Orlikowski and Iacono (2001, p. 132) believe that researchers have to conceptualise IT artefacts as "multiple, fragmented, partial, and provisional". Certain technologies, such as the Internet, "do not provide the same material and cultural properties in each local time or context of use." As Wyatt, Thomas and Terranova put it: all "technologies are imbued with cultural significance" (2002, p. 39).

This is again true for national as well as organisational or other local cultures. It also goes a long way to explaining why certain types of ICT are used successful in one context and fail in different one. Examples are easy to find. Riis (1997), for example, offers the example of the Danish strategy of developing the Internet infrastructure which was sensitive to the Danish culture of social development. The Internet is probably a good example of this since it is a technology that is available in many places in different cultural circumstances, which leads to widely differing uses and interpretations.

Critical research on ICT in cross-cultural contexts

So far this paper has introduced several different concepts: critical research, including the question of emancipation; culture, including the question of cultural universality; and the relationship between culture and ICT. It is now time to integrate these different strands of the discussion. We now need to ask the question whether critical research on ICT is possible across cultural barriers. To make this question more accessible, let us imagine an example: A growing area of interest for researchers in ICT is the relationship between ICT and development. Many countries spend large amounts of money on ICT in the hope that it will help them achieve a higher level of development. Similarly, many of the more developed countries make aid available for the procurement of ICT. Such initiatives are often highly problematic. In many cases they do not deliver the desired outcome. One possible reason for this is that they may be based on biases and uncertain concepts (i.e., "development") that render them hard to grasp.

This is an area that interests many researchers. There are journals and conferences exclusively dedicated to ICT in global/development contexts and even journals that look at specific aspects of such technology use, i.e. education (e.g. the International Journal of Education and Development using ICT [http://ijedict.dec.uwi.edu/]). The question this paper wants to explore is: Is it possible to do critical research, including the express orientation toward emancipation, in such cross-cultural contexts? Or, to put the question more bluntly, can we as western researchers tell the users and decision makers in ICT in developing countries what to do in order to become emancipated?

The attempt to realise emancipatory critical research across cultural boundaries is fraught with numerous problems. Some of them are related directly to the underlying concepts. As mentioned earlier, there is no consensus on what critical research should aim for and what the term "emancipation" actually means (Brooke 2002b). A similar problem related to the above example is that we are not too clear about the meaning of development. There is an argument to be had that speaking of development is a self-fulfilling prophecy and that the division in more and less developed countries is an act of cultural imperialism. The current understanding of development seems to be one centred on capitalist economic production and liberal social and political philosophy. It is very much controlled by actors from states that perceive themselves as "developed" and that label others as "under-developed" or "developing". The central assumption is that it is desirable to be in a situation similar to those who are "developed". The debate structures the problem area in a particular way and leaves little room for alternative conceptions of development or the potential for the "developed" to learn from the "developing". Such research may thus produce the very problem it aims to solve. Even if these conceptual problems were solved and if the researcher knew what emancipation means, it stands to reason that it will be a social process that will produce losers as well as winners (Alvesson and Willmott 1992). Emancipation of some may lead to the disempowerment of others (which is not to suggest that it is necessarily and always a zero-sum game). This is related to the idea that critical research needs to engage in politics if it is to make a difference, which leads to the conclusion that there will most likely be stakeholders who will resist critical research (Mingers 1992).

A different problem is that of the acceptance of different cultures. Since emancipation is likely to translate into a different perception of reality and in different conceptualisations of the environment, it is likely to change culture. Who are we as researchers to say that other cultures should be changed? An example of this might be traditional societies which are governed by traditional structures and mores. Behaviour is regulated by the community and individuals are under strong expectations of certain behaviours. Emancipation as an individual approach is likely to weaken the power of such traditions and

thereby change the very structure of the culture. This may even happen through descriptive research where the mere contact with different ways of life destroys cultures. There are numerous examples of indigenous cultures that were destroyed this way. Critical research that intends to change behaviour may be even more likely to have this effect.

This is related to the problem of understanding different cultures. Certain practices may appear highly dominating and alienating to the western researcher and she may perceive a justification to change these. Examples of this could be the religiously justified suppression of women or minorities in some cultures. While such practices may look dominating from the outside, it is unclear how they are perceived from the inside. A good example of this is the debate about Muslim women's headscarf that is taking place in several areas in Europe, most notably in France and Germany. The argument of the opponents to the scarf is that it is a cultural sign of the subjugation of women and that it symbolises their inferior status. In a free and democratic society such signs are not welcome. The proponents argue that the opposite is true, that headscarves are a voluntary display of certain religious beliefs, that they are thus a sign of freedom and that they also allow women to interact more freely with men because it protects them from unwanted advances. The question for us is whether there is a way for critical researchers to judge such debates and come to a coherent position *qua* critical researcher.

A critical researcher will usually not be of the opinion that culture is something that is to be preserved as an end in itself. Moreover, culture as the system of meaning-making and interaction is affected by research as well as technology and therefore the very act of research will affect culture. Also, culture is often the object of intentional manipulation, at least in western market democracies (Burrell and Dale 2003). As such, culture can be a legitimate target for change and emancipation. The question still remains, however, whether there are cultures which researchers can or should not change.

Cultures are not simply given social arrangements that are value-free. I have already mentioned earlier that cultures are intrinsically linked to moral rules and their ethical justification. One aspect of this is that cultures entail narratives about what it means to live a good life. Cultures are thus inherently utopian in the sense that they assume a vision about a desirable society. Critical research, by its nature of intending to change social reality, offers another utopian version of how we should live together. These utopias are often contradictory. The critical researcher thus needs to ask himself or herself whether the critical utopia is more desirable than the given utopia of the culture in question. This refers us back to the question of universalisability. How can the critical researcher defend the claim that her vision of the good life is universally applicable and should supersede the internal vision of members of the culture in question?

By choosing the term "utopia", I have already pointed to another problem of critical research, namely the question of how the desire to change society can be justified. "Utopia", etymologically meaning "nowhere", was Thomas More's vision of a desirable world. However, the term has taken on a more negative connotation. It is now associated with the idea of enforcing one's vision of a good life by all possible means. It is therefore linked to terror and destruction (Castells 2000b).

Another fundamental problem of critical research refers to the possibility of emancipation in and through ICT. In a considerable part of the critical literature on IS, emancipation is translated as participative design and use of systems. In a very lucid critique of this approach, Wilson (1997) point out that such emancipatory strategies have problems justifying their own agenda as better than alternative conceptions. He describes the alternative for critical research as either remaining idealistic but unclear or admitting to having a specific agenda, which can then no longer claim to be universally acceptable.

A different charge of the impossibility of empowerment comes from postmodernism. Postmodernist objection to grand narratives can be translated into a strong cultural particularism, which renders the hope to be able to find common ground for emancipation futile (Walsham 1993). And then there is the empirical observation of contradictory moralities, which, given the moral nature of emancipation and the strong link of culture with morality, can also be seen as a reason for the incompatibility of the researcher's view of emancipation and the research subject's understanding of the world.

All of these arguments can be taken as a fatal critique of the critical intention to emancipate. If they are true then it seems unlikely that emancipatory concerns can be realised across cultural boundaries. Worse, the very attempt to emancipate people from different cultures can then be seen as cultural imperialism. Given the inability to do justice to other cultures, emancipation can quickly become a utopia in the worst sense, i.e., one supporting terror and repression, not liberation. Thought through to the end, it can mean that foreign intellectuals design a path that is not compatible with a culture and destroys traditional ways of living and turns into outright terror. The conclusion could thus be that we

need to move away from the idea of emancipation and thus from critical research.

However, I do not support such a negative conclusion. While all of the considerations are valid to some degree, they overlook one central factor: namely that we interact with other cultures anyway and that all research – both that which is explicitly critical and that which is not – has the potential to change cultures and societies. By explicitly considering the idea of emancipation, critical researchers are forced to think about the results of their research and are therefore more sensitive to these issues than other researchers. The only alternative to affecting cultures through research is not to do any intercultural research any more. But even this would be a conscious decision with consequences for other cultures. It would be a conservative choice based on the assumption that all cultures are equally valid and that there is nothing we can learn from or teach to other cultures. Such a stance is logically consistent but it is also deeply relativist. It assumes that a democratic culture that values human rights is fundamentally equal to a head-hunter and cannibal society. Moreover, such a stance would seem to imply that research must be restricted to within the boundaries of one's own culture – a conclusion most researchers, especially in an era of globalization fostered by ICTs that make crossing boundaries so easy, would not likely accept. For those of us who do not accept this, critical research can offer a way out that is preferable to purely descriptive research.

We are now at the point where critical research can be described as desirable. Critical researchers nevertheless need to be aware of the fact that emancipation is not easily defined. An even more serious issue is that there is no simple and straightforward way to apply critical thoughts and neither do we have an agreed methodology to go about promoting emancipation. (McGrath 2005) To some degree this is not problematic for critical research because it is an approach that claims to be reflective and thus critical of its own assumptions in any case. The question is how the objections to emancipatory research across cultures can be accommodated and, more specifically, how this can be done with regards to ICT and IS.

One solution to me seems to be a formal approach. All material descriptions or emancipatory practices run the risk of overlooking local particularities and thus becoming unworkable or self-contradictory. In order for the researcher to find out what emancipation with or through ICT can mean in a different culture, it is necessary to create procedures that allow the individuals or groups in question to develop their own vision of emancipation or empowerment. The researcher does not necessarily have to accept these at face value and she can interact with such visions. But she does not have the authority to prescribe them. A possible example of this is the use of anonymity in group decision support systems (GDSS). This feature is often described as liberating and thus emancipatory in western contexts. However, in other cultural settings it may be seen as counter to the culture of "saving face" and therefore against the interests of the participants and thus not emancipatory (cf. Abdat and Pervan 2000). The conclusion should thus be that the critical researcher will not prescribe certain features that she believes to be emancipatory but that she gives the research subjects the chance to define their version of emancipation.

A resulting question is whether such formal approaches imply material conclusions. Is there anything that a critical researcher can prescribe to the research subjects in the name of emancipation? I believe that the Habermasian discourse approach can give us some answers. A Habermasian discourse is formal in the sense described above in that it does not tell people what emancipation will look like for them. At the same time, it explicates the conditions of successful discourses that are summarised under the headings of the "ideal speech situation". These conditions, in turn, can be used to create material conditions that allow the formal approach to emancipation. In more practical terms this means that there are situations and circumstances that critical researchers should promote in the name of emancipation, such as democratic participation, freedom of speech, or stakeholder inclusion. These do not constitute emancipation but they are the necessary conditions of determining what emancipation means. A current example of this can be seen in the area of the use of ICT for government and democratic purposes. Such uses can be promoted as beneficial when and where they lead to the ability of individuals to interact and widen the spaces for possible discourses (cf. Heng and de Moor 2003). Which form the resulting emancipation will take that can develop from such interactions cannot be predicted. It may go against the wishes of those who provide the technology by giving power to political parties who promote policies contrary to those imagined by critical researchers. Similar examples can easily be imagined on an organisational level. In terms of critical research in IS this means that the participative approaches that are often associated with Habermasian ideas do indeed seem to be a promising way to address emancipatory issues. Not because they represent successful emancipation, but rather because they allow for an acceptable definition of emancipation.

This brings us back to the critique of critical research and emancipatory practices as voiced by Wilson and others. Can critical research claim to be anything other than a particular special interest? First, the question may be misleading because critical research reflects on its biases but it does not claim to be free of biases. It is based on the assumption that emancipation is possible and desirable. But second, and more important, critical research recognises that there is no objective description of the world anyway. The researcher thus is not faced with the supposed dilemma of choosing between conducting either value-free or emancipatory research. Rather, given the choice between different values, including emancipation or conservativism, critical researchers make the conscious choice to make a critical intervention. It therefore seems to me that the only alternative to emancipatory research is that of complete relativism, which I do not believe to be theoretically tenable or practically desirable.

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