

## Is that all there is? The concept of care and the dialectic of critique

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Received 8 August 2007; received in revised form 11 October 2007; accepted 12 December 2007

### Abstract

Recognition of the usefulness of critical social analysis for gerontology has been increasing just as a range of new problems, ranging from globalization to the anti-aging movement, are posing fresh questions about ideology, legitimation and inequality for the study of aging. Such problems and questions represent the negative moment of critique in the theory–practice dialectic. As is generally true of critical theory, in critical gerontology it is rare to find research that reflects a positive movement toward emancipatory change. Yet gerontology is one of the fields that offers special opportunities for critiquing the status quo of aging and elders in society, envisioning new possibilities for aging and developing practices that produce positive change. This paper describes the movement of our own thinking and work, away from a primary focus on analysis and critique and toward an embrace of the possibilities of generating and sustaining change in organizational care settings. We argue that principles of critical developmental and social theory can be used to reframe the concept of care, and we describe briefly how the methodology of action research can be applied in efforts to create new opportunities and possibilities in the everyday experience of elders in long-term care. In our work, we are learning how a constructive theory–practice dialectic can be initiated when critical principles are applied to a practical and urgent domain — the domain of interpersonal care within long-term care institutions for elders.

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*Keywords:* Action research; Agency; Care; Critical theory; Dialectic; Emancipation; Empowerment; Gerontology; Social action; Theory and practice

### Introduction

From its beginnings, the symbiotically interdependent discourses of functionalist sociology and developmental psychology have provided the dominant theoretical narratives of social gerontology. The dominance of these intertwined approaches has often been unintended rather than deliberate. Gerontology as a field has paid

relatively little attention to issues of theory, instead focusing heavily the “social problems” aspects of aging, and on the collection of data geared to address issues ranging from caregiver burden to incontinence to depression (Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001). Justifiably concerned with the rapidly expanding problems of old age in a society that is both ageist and graying, many gerontological researchers have found little time to think in terms of overarching models or underlying assumptions. Yet over the past two decades, it has been noted with increasing frequency that the social problems orientation has not been without cost. It resulted in empirical studies with limited ability to contribute to knowledge

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accumulation, and it constrained the kinds of questions that seemed relevant, obscuring from view constitutive elements of the process of aging (Dannefer, 1984; Kastenbaum, 1981). Gerontology has been, in the oft-repeated assessment of James Birren and Vern Bengtson (1988), “data rich and theory poor”.

This set of conditions has made social gerontology an “easy mark” for those with training in critical social theory and related traditions. Over the past two decades, numerous critical analyses of knowledge in gerontology and related fields have been offered by scholars working from a range of critical perspectives, including political economy, hermeneutics and ideology critique. These lines of critical scholarship introduced useful analytical perspectives for both qualitative and quantitative research and encouraged the larger community of gerontological researchers to reflect on unquestioned assumptions and to clarify their premises. The need for critical social analysis in gerontology has not diminished: Emerging issues ranging from the anti-aging movement to globalization are posing new issues of ideology, legitimation and inequality, while newly packaged reductionist approaches, ranging from rational choice theory to misunderstood evolutionary thought, continue to appeal to many of our colleagues in gerontology and related fields.

While such analyses thus will continue to be needed and important, it must also be asked how fully they represent the *potential* contributions of critical social analysis. Specifically, we are concerned that most current analyses represent only the more straightforward aspects of the project of critical theory. The delimited focus, straightforward logic, and theoretically vulnerable targets of such critiques have made them *intellectually easy* to make, while their detachment from difficult ethical dilemmas and often-gripping personal realities of aging in everyday life make them *existentially easy* to make. They are well within the comfort zone of those who Bill Pinar has termed “Macho Marxists” (1994), who are content to make analytically compelling critiques of a specific problem, while avoiding questions that are less easy to dispense with, or that require more personal and existential engagement and critical self-reflection on the part of the theorist her/himself.

Hence the question, “Is that all there is?” We suggest that a focus on macro-level analyses of political economy and knowledge construction has allowed other relevant issues to go largely unacknowledged and neglected by social scientists. Aging studies and gerontology deal unavoidably with the material, organismic foundation of human existence. Thus, they confront scholars with the stubborn realities of the ultimately precarious nature of existence, and with questions of the

significance of human individuality, of the meaning of age, frailty and mortality, and of the fundamental character of collective human experience (Derks, *in press*). Such questions transcend social and historical location, even though the answers offered are always historically and socially located. Yet critical gerontology, with few exceptions (Cole, Kastenbaum, & Ray, 2000; Ray, 2000) has been quite silent on the nature of lives and relationships in the immediacy of everyday experience in the current historical moment.

These issues are hardly irrelevant to the larger project of the critical tradition, which is based on a vision of human wholeness and possibility realized through a dialectic of theory and practice. Within this project, critique is properly understood not as the consummate goal of analysis, but as a point of embarkation. It is an initial step, a moment of negation in a theory–practice dialectic, whose intent is to move toward a fuller realization of human interests and to expand the horizon of emancipatory ideals.

While the problems of personal anxiety and death, vulnerability, frailty and dependency can be aggravated by social conditions, they are not entirely reducible to matters of politics and ideology. Although social arrangements clearly produce *surplus suffering* (Dannefer, 2006), the generic experiences of suffering, anxiety and vulnerability are fundamental to lived experience. They are an integral part of the ontogeny of the organism, through which the material world is linked to human society, and they are preoccupations of every cultural tradition, bound up with issues of human interest, significance and meaning.

While some of these knottier questions may extend beyond the realm of empirical science to domains such as metaphysics or theology, others are practical and are centrally relevant to personal engagement in everyday life. Under the imposed conditions of human destructiveness that are part of everyday life (Fromm, 1973), are there yet possibilities of progressive movement? Whatever is occurring at the macro-level, micro-interaction is the site where human agency is universally expressed, as consciousness is externalized in human activity. The capacities of social forms are mediated by ‘artful’ achievements of everyday agency. Although most such activity is inherently reproductive (since it is expressed through the conservative institution of language), face-to-face interaction also offers a potential entry point for change, including efforts at deliberate progressive change, even under adverse macro-level conditions. It is, after all, a site at which imagination and intentionality are formulated and articulated by individual actors.

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