

**Giving research a Habermasian spin,
fieldwork from a critical perspective.**

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Abstract

This paper explores how Habermas' theory of communicative action could be used in organizational studies. The theory describes the thickly layered textures of validity claims embedded in our communication. Habermas suggests that we could understand our actions by considering their practical-communicative, performative character. We might tell ourselves that each discussion or dialogue should be understood in its 'own context' but the very context itself is not given, but rather created in subtle political ways (Forester 2003). To conclude, this paper does not assume that critical analysis is automatically transferred into effective critical practices. Rather that by higher awareness of these different layers we would be able to generate a greater understanding of what is said, meant and done in organizational practices undertaken by studies and analysis.

Introduction

In discussions we want to understand each other, but more than this we want to know what end the speaker seeks. We want to know the purpose of what the other person is saying, what interests he has and which his intentions are. Furthermore, we want to know the usefulness of what he is saying and what the trustworthiness of it is (Habermas 1984). In Forester's term (2003), we want to know how in shaping attention – and neglect – selectively, the speaker will shape other people's senses of 'can' and 'can't', others' senses of what is and what is not possible, and thus others' political agendas (Forester 2003). Every speech is also an *action* to some end (Habermas 1984). Examining actions of discussion in this way then becomes extraordinarily interesting. Dialogues are thickly layered textures of political struggles concerning power and authority, cultural negotiations over identities, and social constructions of the 'problems' at hand (cf. Forester 2003:48). This paper presents an exploration of how Habermas theory of communicative action could be utilized in research analysis and studies undertaken in the field of organization and management.

Habermas' theory of communicative action is about connecting the 'language-theory foundation with social sciences' (Habermas 1984). Habermas himself presents it as a social theory rather than a meta-theory, or as he concludes the analysis of basic concepts and social reconstructions belong inseparably together (Ibid.). This means trying to bridge the theories of constructivism and structuralism, trying to bridge 'lifeworld' and 'system'.

The aim of this paper is to utilize Habermas' theory of communicative action in research.

The critical perspective

Since the declaration of 'progress'; freedom, justice and happiness, there has also been a powerful stream of pessimism in contemporary consciousness. According to postmodernism there is of course, a good reason for being critical to the 'project of modernism' which has been accompanied by fragmentation, discontinuity, and loss of meaning. Modernism, is a perspective focusing on how the world becomes (more and more) defined by economic and organizational logic and forces. Whereas postmodernism could be explained as a way of sceptically viewing the world as a unified and correct entity, also postmodernism of social science emphasizes the importance of subjective perspective (André 2008).

Critical management studies, CMS, stresses that distance from tradition has gone hand in hand with alienation, unstable identities, and existential insecurities. Technical progress has by no means been only a blessing, but also the end of freedom and self-determination. Shifting attention from a teleological dimension to the communicative dimension of social action makes an analysis of language, as our basic medium for communication, essential in laying the foundation of social theory. What is called for is a critical suspicion, a reasoned critique, of the western 'progresses' (Burrell, Morgan 1979).

In speaking we relate to the world around us, to other subjects, to our own intentions, feelings and desires. In this ongoing process we are making claims, even if usually only implicitly, concerning the validity of what we are claiming. We present claims regarding the truth of what we say in relation to the objective world, or claims regarding the rightness, appropriateness or legitimacy of what we are saying (Habermas 1984). This is done in relation to the shared norms and values of our social world. At the same time, there are ways of misusing or setting dispute claims, for example by appealing to authority, to tradition or by using force (Ibid.).

Radical humanism can be viewed as enduring philosophical dialogues with thinkers such as; Hegel and Weber, Neo-Marxist and Kant's notion of ultimate reality is that the universe is spiritual rather than material in nature. It is explicitly the work of the young Marx that critical theory builds upon. Burrell and Morgan (1979) describe differences between Neo-Marx's theory and mature-Marx as an 'epistemological break', identifying a shift from radical humanism to the radical structuralism paradigm (Burrell, Morgan 1979). Radical humanism derives from the same intellectual source as the interpretative paradigm, with subject-oriented starting points in common even they serve fundamentally different ends. The interpretative and radical humanism paradigms are both based upon the notion that the individual creates

the world in which he lives. The interpretative thinkers are content to *understand* the nature of this process, whereas the radical humanists' thinkers also subject *critique* to it (Hatch 2006, Prasad 2005).

Habermas' theory of communicative action

Critical theory divides into three broad schools of thought: Lukácsian sociology, Gramsci's sociology and the Frankfurt School. Even if they differ at a substantive level, they build upon Marx's inversion of the Hegelian system of thought. The Frankfurt School claims CMS as its own property, especially in the work by Horkheimer (1937/1972), in which he draws a distinction between traditional science and critical theory. Generally, Adorno, Benjamin, Fromm, Kirschheimer, Lowenthal, Marcuse, Habermas and many others have aimed at uncovering the underlying nature of capitalist societies and set the basis for social change through a revolution of consciousness. These critical theorists have forged a wide-ranging perspective which was aimed at revealing the nature of capitalist society for what it is. Even so, the Frankfurt school put less emphasis on political action, but rather on philosophical and intellectual criticism (Burrell, Morgan 1979, Prasad 2005).

Jurgen Habermas, one of the most distinguished Frankfurt scholars, developed the theory of the communicative action (1984) in an effort to leave the philosophy of consciousness, and to ground critical theory in an analysis of language use (Prasad 2005). The theory of communicative action, which is linguistic-based is constructed on the notion that to be human is to communicate, and embedded in communication is the ideal of genuine consensus. In society it is its members that in coordinated actions, in communication, strive toward an agreement, a shared understanding. It is striving for consensus that according to Habermas makes society's cornerstone. To be effective and ethical, this consensus has to be arrived at under conditions of rationality and equality. An *ideal speech community* is when social agreements can be met without manipulation (Ibid.). This would introduce an affirmative agenda, not a utopia, but still a hope for how we might reform institutions according to a morally driven discourse in situations approaching an ideal speech situation. Communicative action allows an exploration of every statement, on the following (universal) validity criteria: comprehensibility, sincerity, truthfulness, and legitimacy (Alvesson & Deetz 2005).

According to Habermas rationality has less to do with the possession of knowledge, but more to do with how the speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge. We can announce a competition to have begun, we can provide comfort to others by what we say, and

at the same time we are able to stir up conflicts by our opinions. However, these actions could be described as rational, when our knowledge, our ability to predict what the reactions would be is guiding the actions. Even so, the knowledge upon which we build our rational actions could be unreliable according to someone else. Then the listener could claim the truth of the assertion and the effectiveness of the action (Habermas 1984).

Habermas separates two historical learning processes and forms of rationality: the technological-scientific strategy and the communicative-political ethical, where Habermas is trying to contribute to the latter (Alvesson & Deetz 2005). Habermas believes that the discourses of these two traditions are inadequate, and that they reflect and serve the interest of those who use them. Further, Habermas stresses the idea that the structure of domination is embedded within our language and everyday discourse. He describes an 'ideal speech situation', in which 'symbolic interaction' is possible since genuine consensus can be arrived at between parties in communication, and there is no power problem. The other alternative is, 'communicative distortion', in which a supposed consensus is arrived at through discourse within the context of unequal power distribution (Prasad 2005). To achieve the ideal speech situation, there is a mutual wish to understand and believe the other. Furthermore, there is no power, status, prestige, ideology, manipulation or other form of mischief that influences the base for developing ideas. Decision-making becomes based on the strength of good, well-grounded arguments provided in an open forum (Alvesson & Deetz 2005).

Communicative rationality signifies a way of responding to different validity claims. The response might be accepting the validity or questioning and testing it. Universal validity claims, criteria, put forward by Habermas are: comprehensibility, sincerity, truthfulness and legitimacy (Alvesson & Deetz 2006). Below how the validity claims as presented by Forester (2003) and Alvesson and Deetz (2000) (Alvesson & Deetz 2000, Forester 2003) are summarized:

- a) *Comprehensibility*: We represent the issues before us in a selective language, terminology or framework, which a listener or a reader may accept or challenge as possibly incomprehensible.
- b) *Sincerity*: We express an 'inner' state of self, emotions, and disposition such as seriousness, anger, impatience or frustration, which a listener may trust or alternatively challenge as feigned or inauthentic.

- c) *Truthfulness*: We refer to ‘outer’ states of affairs, which a listener or a reader may explore as truly or falsely existing.
- d) *Legitimacy*: We invoke contextual norms that legitimate the action we are undertaking, norms to which the listener and reader may consent or alternatively challenge as inappropriate to the situation at hand.

In a discussion we want to know who seeks what ends and what purposes, interests, wants and intentions the speaker has. Furthermore, as Forester (2003) suggests we want to know much more than that as we enter discussions; we want to know about the other actors, their allegiances and loyalties, their trustworthiness and integrity, in general about their political and social identities. We want to know how the speaker in shaping attention, and neglecting, selectively, shapes our sense of what is and what is not. As actors pursue ends, they refashion social and political relations, and when decisions are made, and texts written, relations of power are also refashioned (Forester 2003). According to March and Olsen (1976) as cited in Forrester (2003): “*Choice situations are not simply occasions for making substantive decisions. They are also arenas in which important symbolic meanings are developed*” (Forester 2003:48).

Table 1. Validity claims and their relations to language functions, domains of reality, and contingent ways actors could make practical claims.

Validity claims	Function of language	Worlds (domains of reality)	Actual and contingent ways that actors make practical claims:
Comprehensibility	propositional for any communication to take place	the descriptive part of the communicative act	adopt a conversational way of representing issues, and so frame their listener’s attention selectively
Sincerity	expressive use	subject world	express the speaker’s disposition, and so appeal to their listener’s trust
Truthfulness	cognitive use	object world	refer to states of affairs, and so shape their listeners beliefs
Legitimacy	interactive use	social world	invoke legitimate norms, and so appeal to listener’s consent

Building on work by: (Forester 2003, Goldkuhl 2000, Habermas 1984).

Comprehensibility is the descriptive part of the communicative act (propositional aspect)

Comprehensibility is a validity claim according to Habermas (Habermas 1987) and can be seen as the most fundamental claim of all the four claims. Thus this claim can be seen as the basis for the other claims (Goldkuhl 2000). If the speaker can not present an understandable case, then there is, by definition, nothing to understand and assess. Comprehensibility orients both the speaker (writer) and the listener (reader) in a particular way, shaping the way issues are attended to and how we understand them. This is a way of shaping patterns of belief, consent, and identity and problem formulation. In so doing the relationship of power is also reshaped (Forester 2003).

Sincerity (genuineness) refers to the subject world

As soon as participants reach mutual understanding of what the words are in any grammatical language they can, and do, appeal to the validity of norms in various ways and can differentiate the force of the normative in various respects, for example, by conceding, delegating, allowing, regretting, punishing or authorizing someone (Habermas 1987). To be sincere about an action, in description, is when others understand it as true, since, if the action (the description) is understood as false, incorrect, or inadequate it will be rejected. The sincerity of a validity claim is accepted when its action (for example its request, demand, appeal, suggestion) can be considered as executable (Ibid.).

Truthfulness refers to the object world

When participants in communication express a mutual understanding of experimental sentences or normative sentences, they have to be able to relate to something in the objective world with their speech acts (Habermas 1987). This claim refers to the objective world and is valid if the statement is perceived as true, i.e. if it corresponds to reality. According to Habermas one way of describing 'objectivity' would be when a judgement undertakes a claim that has the same meaning for the observer and the nonparticipants as it has for the acting subject himself (Habermas 1984).

Legitimacy refers to the social world

A claim that refers to the social world is valid if it has been honestly presented and if it recognizes the commonly agreed social norms. This means that it is the task of the culture to supply the reason why an existing political order deserves to be recognized (Habermas 1987).

Habermas finds that the need for legitimation that arises for structural reasons in civilizations is especially precarious (Ibid). The social world establishes rules and norms to which we respond, and we take part in establishing the social rules. The power of social rules influences behaviour, shapes attitudes and creates positive or negative images.

The consequence, for Habermas, is that human beings are defined as democratic beings, as *homo democraticus* (Flyvbjerg 1998). As for the validity claims is defined as consequences without force: *“a contested norm cannot meet the consent of the participants in a practical discourse unless...all affected can freely accept the consequences and the side effects that the general observance of a controversial norm can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the interests of each individual”*. Habermas (1990) calls this validity the ‘(U)’, the ‘universalisation principle’, of discourse ethics. The only ‘force’ used in ideal speech situations is ‘the force for better argument’.

Furthermore, in Habermas’ work the participants in speech situations all respect five discourse ethics:

1. No party affected by what is being discussed should be excluded from the discourse (the requirement for generality)
2. All participants should have equal possibility to present and to criticize validity claims in the process of discourse (autonomy)
3. Participants must be willing and able to empathize with each others validity claims (idea role taking)
4. Existing power differences between participants must be neutralized such that these differences have no effect on the creation of consensus (power neutrality)
5. Participants must openly explain their goals and intentions and in the connection desists from strategic action (transparency)

(Habermas 1993, 1990)

Flyvbjerg (1998) have added a sixth: unlimited time. Habermas is a universalistic, ‘top-down’ moralist as concerns process: the rules for correct process are normatively given in advance, in the form of the requirements for the ideal speech situation.

Problems (challenges) with Habermas theory (project)

According to Flyvbjerg (1998) the basic weakness of Habermas project is its lack of agreement between ideal and reality, between intentions and implementation. Habermas describes to us the utopia of communicative rationality but not how to get there. Habermas

has according to Flyvbjerg (1998) little to say about the relations of power that create barriers and how power may be changed in order to begin the kind of institutional and educational change and improvements in welfare. In Habermas theory of communicative action a *proiri* stance for the researcher is taken, this in order to assume answers to questions. To assume answers a priori or to assume that in a dialogue there is either validity or a rejection, *ex ante*, is to universalize and as Habermas builds a theory upon it, makes it a problematic philosophy and as Flyvbjerg (1998:216) calls it 'speculative social science'. This might be a reason for being a bit careful in using the theory of communicative rationality to understand and act in relation to civil society.

The critique directed at Habermas' communicative actions has varied and will here be only briefly discussed (for further elaboration see for example; (Lee 1991, Saiedi 1987, Feldman 2005). The essence of the criticism is that Habermas overstates the possibility of rationality and the value of consensus. Therefore he puts too much weight on the clarity and rationality potential of language and human interaction (Alvesson & Deetz 2000). Habermas' validity claims have, by for example Saiedi (1987), received the following critique: the validity claims have neglected the relevance of professional knowledge and facts for the choice of ends. Secondly, the claim of legitimacy in Habermas theory has according to Saiedi overlooked the phenomenon of conflicts between different norms. Finally, the claim for sincerity has been accused of being presented as far too uniform, assuming a homogeneous subjective self neglecting the duality of identity (conscious and unconscious) and without historical bonding (Saiedi 1987).

In order to reflect on (overcome) these challenges

Whether the communicative or rhetorical positions (successful or distorted) are 'correct' is not the question since both positions are possible at the same time. Rather there are according to Flyvbjerg (1998) other issues that are far more important to ask, they are:

- How does communication take place and how politics and democracy operate?
- Is communication characterized by consensus-seeking and absence of power?
- Or is communication the exercise of power and rhetoric?
- How do consensus-seeking and rhetoric, freedom from domination and exercise of power, eventually come together in individual acts of communications?

The basic question according to Flyvbjerg is that one can not in a meaningful manner distinguish rationality and power from each other in communication and whether rationality can be viewed in isolation from power, as does Habermas.

Conclusions

In the spirit of critical theory this paper has demonstrated and reviewed the possibility to utilize Habermas communicative action theory in research. The analyses using Habermas' categories enable us to understand and pay attention to the four-layered practical structure of social and political interactions. Applying the Habermasian view to communication highlights the powerful moves of social actors who both seek instrumental ends and at the same time construct social and political order. As Forester (2003) summarizes it: We can utilize but move beyond a strictly phenomenological analysis (Forester 2003).

What Habermas means by communicative action is that the process of reaching a common understanding is on-going: understanding will never be final. Communicative action takes place when actors are prepared to harmonize their plans of actions through internal means, committing themselves to pursuing their goals only on the condition of an agreement, one that already exists or one to be negotiated (as in the studied excerpt), about definitions of the situation and prospective outcomes (Habermas 1990). When someone rejects what is offered in a speech act, he denies the validity of the utterance, in at least one of the four respects: comprehensibility, truthfulness, legitimacy or sincerity (Ibid.). A person's 'no' signals that the utterance has failed to fulfill at least one of the four claims, as Habermas explains: *'because the utterance is not in accordance with either the world of existing states of affairs, our world of legitimacy ordered interpersonal relations, or each participant's own world of subjective lived experience'* (Habermas 1990:137). However, even if Habermas presents the validity claims as different, he also stresses that there is no possibility to differentiate them (Ibid.). There is a binding/bonding effect of speech acts that expands beyond the range of convictions with descriptive content (Habermas 1987).

This paper has explored the utility of Habermas theory of communicative actions. The theory expresses how we could 'systematic improve' our lifeworld through an expanded conception, focusing on the creation and re-creation of patterns of meaning (Alvesson & Deetz 2006). The critical perspective which focuses on emancipated actions is applied in the same spirit. An ideal speech situation is about bringing about mutual understanding and trying to accomplish free and open argumentation. However, as Alvesson and Deetz (2006) observe: *'The ideal requires stepping out of the flow of everyday action to investigate the process of producing mutual understanding'*. (Alvesson & Deetz 2006) The aim of this paper has been to show how such a stepping out could be done in a Habermasian way. Habermas' theory as used here, as

an analytic framework in organizational studies, can provide much guidance to understanding and discussion about decision-making in the organizations.

Another implication, of carrying out a Habermasian spin is that seemingly neutral and unified actions and discussions are uncovered for what they are: multilayered social constructed actions with different meanings. As writers of managerial and organizational text we should therefore be aware of whose voice it is we are reproducing, whose power it is that we are rebuilding, and who it is we are marginalizing. As Rae (2008) points out it is important to pay attention to the variety of different human perspectives (Rae 2008). With Habermas' theory of communicative action we are able to see that our language is playing a central role as an alienation force in our social lives (Burrell & Morgan 1979), as well as harmonizing force in management communications.

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