Learning Theories:

Postmodernism Vs. Critical Theory

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Abstract

Knowledge is seen as a tool for many aspects of life. To obtain knowledge has been an argument that many philosophers have brought up stating that epistemology, the theory of knowledge, is dependent on various factors that involves complex cognitive processes and the social environment. Critical theorists and postmodernists both view epistemology as socially constructed and fixed in a particular context, but the two differ as critical theorists assume that rationality is a means to better knowledge, whereas postmodernists do not assume that. Critical theorists believe people tend to choose what they know based upon what interests them. With furthering the research on the subject can help compare and contrast the concepts of each viewpoint, possibly seeing which method is preferred.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Nature of the Problem

Knowledge is socially constructed and situated in a particular context from both a critical or postmodern perspective (Kilgore, 2001). Kilgore (2001) states that the primary difference between the two worldviews is that critical theorists assume that rationality is a means to better knowledge, whereas postmodernists assume no such thing. Critical theorists understand knowledge as a logical outcome of neatly categorized human interests; they believe that people tend to know about what they are interested in being able to do. On the other hand, postmodern theorists view knowledge as not fixed or certain, opposing the idea of it being rational. Postmodern theorists believe that “different people hold a variety of perspectives on the same phenomenon for many reasons” being a particular interest as the logical result (Kilgore, 2001).

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of the paper is to compare and contrast the ideas of critical theorists and postmodernists' views on epistemology through various aspects of society (e.g. social, education, political). Although both sides agree that knowledge is socially constructed, detailed explanations of their views displays their differences. Whether if they both agree or disagree on the matter, many studies and research studies interpret the how both methods are applicable in society. By using examples in several developed studies, should help distinguish how each viewpoint has its advantages and how it is beneficial for people. First, the main ideas of both postmodernism and critical theory will be defined; which will help in describing how they both
play a role in a society, whether it be socially or educationally.

**Definition of Terms**

Before getting started, there are terms used in the paper that need to be defined to better understand the context.

*Epistemology*- theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope. Addresses the questions: (a) What is knowledge? (b) How is knowledge acquired? (c) How do we know what we know?

*Discourse*- an epistemological framework in which the very ordering of knowledges lends significance and value to how these knowledges are expressed and practiced (Dybicz, 2011).

*Deconstruction*- A philosophical movement and theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth; asserts that words can only refer to other words; and attempts to demonstrate how statements about any text subvert their own meaning

*antiessentialism*- Words are not held to have referents with essential or universal qualities; rather, meaning is generated through the relationship between signs. Consequently, being discursive constructions, categories change their meanings according to time, place and usage.

*Radicalism*- the political orientation of those who favor revolutionary change in government and society.

*Carspecken critical ethnography*- aimed to study and challenge oppression to expose domination and displace and inequalities that are taken for granted. Argued that critical theorists view society as structured into privileged and oppressed social groups.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance

Agger (1991) examined the main theoretical contributions of critical theory, poststructuralism and postmodernism. A main idea of critical theory is the “attempt to develop a mode of consciousness and cognition that breaks the identity of reality and rationality, viewing social facts not as inevitable constrains on human freedom, but as pieces of history that can be changed. Critical theory looks to reduce (a) class society, (b) patriarchy, (c) racism, and (d) domination of nature. With postmodernism, Agger (1991) defines it as a theory of society, culture, and history. “A postmodern theory would examine the social world from multiple perspective of class, race, gender and other identifying group affiliations,” opposing the idea of radicalism. The article referred to Derrida, French feminists whom included their methodology of textual reading called deconstruction, which challenged traditional literary and cultural criticism. Derrida claimed that any text is not justifiable because an individual that reads it will have a different perspective on it. “What it appears to 'say' on the surface cannot be understood without reference to the concealments and contextualizations of meaning going on simultaneously to mark the test's significance (Agger, 1991). In other words, a reader's understanding of the text will be different from what the author is trying to convey because the perception of the two is not the same.

Critical and Postmodern Perspectives on Adult Learning

Kilgore (2001) explained that the main difference between the two views is that critical theorists assumed rationality (reasonable and logical) is a means to better knowledge, where postmodernists do not think the same way. Critical theorists believe that people know what
“they are interested in being able to do.” The difference between ideas was given by an example of how one person may view a job as an opportunity (provides them with financial support, wonderful coworkers, may lead to something greater in the future) whereas another person may view the job as a “demeaning step down” (Kilgore, 2001). The two worldviews also differ in the ideas of knowledge, power, and learning. For critical theorists, knowledge is a rational product of human interests and frees subjects from power, viewing knowledge as an interest for an individual and with more knowledge gives more power. Meanwhile, postmodernist view knowledge as tentative, multifaceted, and an expression of power; giving the idea that knowledge is uncertain and has many aspects to it and power as different expressions. Critical theorists believe that subjects possess power, as power is a characteristic while postmodernism believed that subjects express power as power is produced. Critical theory believes learning is achieved through critical reflection, adding depths to meanings by questioning and relating on personal level and through reasoning. Postmodernism believe learning is achieved through deconstruction, opposing the idea of contradictions (e.g. male vs. female), and “productively opening the discourse of a field to an eclectic mosaic of many truths” (Kilgore, 2001).

**Postmodernism and its Challenge to Discipline of History**

In the article, Yilmaz (2010) explained that there is no precise definition of postmodernism as it is “elusive or ambiguous term.” The author stated that because postmodernism varies from country to country, the definition is perceived differently across numerous disciplines. Although there is no precise definition, Yilmaz (2010) gathered several descriptions of postmodernism from published authors and researchers. Usher and Edwards (1994) described postmodernism as “a state of mind, a critical, self-referential posture and style, a different way of seeing and working rather than a fixed body of ideas, a clearly worked-out
position or a set of critical methods and techniques.” Other authors such as Peters (2001) and Giroux (1988) agreed that postmodernism is a style and an attitude. Harvey (1990) described it best as the “legacy of Enlightenment modernity be it scientific rationality, universal truth claims, progressive emancipation or human betterment” (Yilmaz, 2010).

Along with the definition, postmodernism questions the belief in scientific knowledge, viewing it as socially constructed and dependent on language like all other human communications (Patton, 2002). In regards to learning, Yilmaz (2010) stated that with a postmodernist approach to learning, teachers pay attention to differences in their students' learning styles, ethnicity, and/or cultural background. Rather than the traditional teaching method, the postmodernist approach encourages teachers to be facilitators or a guide by giving students the opportunity to articulate their own voice and be actively involved. Yilmaz (2010) explained that “social studies teachers can deepen and extend their students' learning experiences in history by benefiting from postmodern ideas and perspectives in their instructional planning and evaluation.”

**Consequences of Postmodernists Vision**

Hansen (2010) described the main feature of postmodernist is antiessentialism, whereas the perceptions of one object may be justifiable, depending on a person or communities needs. Hansen used birds as an example as they are perceived as (a) biological entities, (b) pets, (c) gods to be worshiped, (d) symbols, (e) foods, and (f) other things; but none represents the correct, singular essence of birds. The idea of postmodernism allows the existence of various perspectives without the concern of other perspectives and with neither being the most correct.

Hansen (2010) compared and contrasted counseling discourse of epistemology between modernists and postmodernists views. The article discussed the approach of a modernists-type
based method where a problem is identified as singular and worked from a top-down process while a postmodernists approach is identified with a bottom-up process. Hansen (2010) explained that language, especially in the counseling process, plays a major role in perspectives of modernists and postmodernists.

Modern and Postmodern Career Theories: The Unnecessary Divorce

Sampson (2009) believed that a postmodern view helped those who supported a modern approach “to think critically about what individuals need and how they can be best served.” Sampson argued that problems are associated when discussing a modern approach and benefits is associated with a postmodern approach, “creating winners and losers in this discussion” (Sampson, 2009). Sampson explained that modernism and postmodernism individually influences career choice when using career assessment, information, and matching. The use of standardized career assessment and information is identified as modern practice posing two potential problems. The first being individuals and labor market change radically and are “too fluid for assessment and information” factors to stay constant over time. Changes occur unexpectedly and with the growing use of technology, careers are constantly changed. The second problem is assessment and information from various sources represents someone else's view of experience; since each individual is different, reality is constructed by an individual's own term. Taking into consideration that not everyone's experiences are the same, an assessment created by an individual can be taken differently by another individual. Matching a person with an occupation is another component of modern approach and criticized because it “ignores intuition, the developmental nature of career choice and influence of social context on decision making” (Sampson, 2009). Although criticized, matching should help individuals in career decision-making, but not determine it. With concerns regarding modern approaches, a
postmodern approach alleviates some of the issues with making a career choice. Sampson (2009) concluded that those who seek assistance with career choices and those who help individuals with making a career choice must “understand and apply an approach that integrates modernism and postmodernism.” Because modern approaches poses problems and postmodern approaches seem too beneficial, an integration of both approaches offers the most useful solution.

A Postmodern Perspective on Current Curriculum Reform in China

The article looked into curriculum reform of basic education in China as the movements to postmodern ideas were being implemented in the reform. Yu-le & Ling (2011) found six major problems in China's education curriculum, which was based on the Western educational system: (a) knowledge transmission-oriented curriculum; (b) a lack of relevance of subjects; (c) too difficult and redundant, (d) material of content had no connection to real life; (e) study, memorizing, and mechanical training were passive; (f) selective and examination-oriented curriculum; and (g) an overly centralized management of curriculum. The educational reform started “under the guidance of systematic theories of educational science and educational reform” (Yu-le & Ling, 2011), in which China chooses a postmodern approach to improve their educational system. Yu-Le and Ling (2011) described China's reform as “building its modernization with a postmodern spirit,” which had appeared in their politics, economy, and culture, with the idea that postmodern educational should flourish. The new theories of postmodernity change the thought and behavior educational organizations, with the former problem of being too mechanical, incomplete, and superficial. Yu-Le and Ling (2011) found that a postmodern approach to the educational system provided (a) both dynamic and internal conditions, which the curriculum before lacked; (b) a mix of both modern and postmodern
rationalistic elements; (c) establishes a more harmonious, ideal world for the modern society; and (d) the new curriculum emphasizes human life in which connects the past, future, and present.

Anything Goes? Science and Social Constructions in Competing Discourses

Dybzic (2011) stated that even though a postmodern approach promotes an “anything goes” attitude where scientific knowledge is ignored, still has an important role in guiding postmodern practice. Understanding the insight of postmodernism showed why scientific knowledge is significant to the approach. The article's purpose was to “demonstrate that postmodern practice seeks a similar goal when embracing scientific knowledge...as a guide to practice that circumscribes the boundaries within a postmodern inquiry can take place” (Dybzic, 2011). Comparing modernist and postmodernist thought, Dybzic (2011) described the thought of modernists using an example of a human being is one object amongst numerous, possibly infinite number of subjects to study. As a postmodernist, a human being stands out as the “creator of all knowledge,” given that humans have the benefits of language. Consciousness-raising methods in postmodernism, making people more aware of personal, social, and political issues, employs the use of scientific knowledge. Therefore, scientific knowledge is utilized in not only modernist methods but in postmodernist method as well.

Critical Ethnography: Extending Attention to Bias and Reinforcement of Dominant Power Relations

The article critiqued the approach of Carspecken's critical ethnography, a form of critical theory that dealt with nursing research (Vanderberg and Hall, 2011). Although critical ethnography was gaining popularity, the method had not adequately addressed how researchers can minimize biases and dominance when studying power relations. Carspecken recommended
to “not to focus on one research question but to create a list of comprehensive, flexible questions related to a particular social group, problem or place and addressing the contextual factors, that may contribute to the understanding of power relations” (Vanderberg & Hall, 2011). Carspecken believed that uncovering assumptions allows researchers to understand how power is acquired and influences experiences.
Chapter 3

Results & Discussions

After reviewing each article, it has seemed that postmodernism is the more favorable approach because of the attention it had gained amongst many researchers, theorists, and educators in the past several years. Understanding the main ideas of postmodernism makes the approach the most beneficial and fitting for any type of epistemology. The first two articles, Agger (1991) did not defend which method is best for knowledge, but described in details what each approach had to offer when it comes to epistemology. Kilgore (2001) explained the differences between postmodernism and critical theory by giving examples of the two worldviews. Yilmaz (2010) supported the idea of postmodernism over other methods because it allows a person to be more open and allows for the idea that everyone is equal, rather than someone who is more knowledgeable has more power. In the next article, Hansen (2010) compares postmodernism and modernism, describing the differences between the two and how each approach is processed. The following two articles, Sampson (2009) along with Yu-Le and Ling (2011) used examples of postmodernism being the preferred approach because of what it has to offer. Although postmodernism is favored, the articles agreed that mixing the already modernism with a postmodern approach when making a career choice and with China's educational system should have the best outcome. Dybicz (2011) focused on a postmodernist approach ignoring scientific knowledge, when in fact; postmodernism uses scientific knowledge as a guide, making a connection between postmodernists and scientific thought. In the last article regarding critical ethnography, Vanderberg and Hall (2011) sided with critical theorists when it came to nursing research by elaborating on Carspecken's theory, but still found flaws in his argument.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

These examples support the idea that a postmodern approach allows for more optimistic as well as realistic types of thinking ranging ideas of epistemology from science and social discourses to career decision making and educational reforms. Although both postmodernist and critical theory share the idea of knowledge being socially constructed; researchers, educators, and theorists favor the postmodern approach. The postmodernism and critical theory approach both showed very promising outcomes when in different aspects of life but in regards to the literature, a postmodern approach was the most likely choice because of the fact that people are different and have different perspectives on ideas, which a postmodern approach accepted.
Reference


